

KATERA RISING

BOOK ONE



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Katera Rising

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Dedication

For all the people who believed I could, even when I didn't.
Thank you.

Chapter One

My foot slips along a wet rock, and my breath hitches as I stumble and recover my footing. Releasing a long slow breath, I return my attention to the dark and uneven path. Cold clings to my skin, and the ever-present moisture of the endless caverns makes the rocks beneath me slick with algae. The harsh glint of flaming torches cast a flickering light that does little to hold back the darkness in the cavern around us. In the distance, the blinding lights from the capital city of Shadowsoul are so bright it cannot be looked at directly but somehow makes everything surrounding it look like it has been swallowed by inky blackness.

I grit my teeth and test the strength of the heavy iron chains that bind my wrists. Tugging at the cold metal does nothing but irritate the raw skin under them. I attempt to inspect the lock in the dim light, but I know there is no opening it. Some things give me a sense of control. Like checking my chains every time, they bind me, just in case a guard makes a mistake and forgets to fasten them, or a weakness in the chain presents itself. If I don't maintain hope, madness is but a few weeks away. Those who don't succumb to the violence of our captors are eventually driven insane by the mistreatment and total lack of control. Only the mentally and physically strong survive here.

I am a survivor. Deep down inside, I know there must be a better life than the terrible cycle my people and I are trapped in. I must believe that, or I might as well lay down and die right here. Not that my odds of survival are particularly high at the moment. I could be dead within the next few hours.

A rock clatters, and the person in front stumbles, jerking me forward as he falls to his knees, the chains connecting us pulling roughly on my wrists.

The guards halt the line, and the man in front of me is roughly hauled to his feet by two guards in scarlet armor. They shove him forward, and the line starts again, moving faster than before over the treacherous path.

"We are going to be late," a gruff male voice grumbles from one of the two guards behind me.

"It's not our fault the idiot fell over," the other guard replies.

“Try explaining that to the overseer when it is your ass he is roasting for dinner,” the gruff voice mutters.

I grit my teeth as the second guard grunts, “I will throw as many of these idiots at the overseer as I need to ensure it is not my ass that gets roasted.”

A command from up ahead forces the line to stop, and we stand still in the semi-darkness. Bright lights high above us peek from behind a high wall, casting a long deep shadow over us. Tension builds in the pit of my stomach.

Droplets fall from a stalactite above me and land with a splash in the puddle near my feet. Drip. Drip. Drip. Watching the endless cycle of drop and splash is surprisingly relaxing.

A commotion up ahead tears my eyes from the pool. An unusual guard marches down the line. His armor is golden and overly flamboyant. He eyes everyone he passes and stops in the middle of the line. Standing with his hands on his hips, he considers the line on either side of him. His pointed yellow ears twitch as he sizes up the two groups.

“Separate them here and take the first half down the left tunnel,” he announces, twitching his half-formed snout.

The guards rush to do his bidding and hastily work to unchain the group. The guard handling the lock drops the keys, and the loud clink echoes through the space. The man looks up in terror.

Ears twitch, and in a yellow blur, the tall guard is upon the man holding him in the air with a single clawed hand. The man dangles, desperately trying to get a grip on the creature that will allow him to take a deeper breath.

“Overseer,” the dangling guard splutters. “I am eternally sorry.”

“Not yet, you’re not.” The overseer sneers. “I will weed out the incompetence of this force.” He grins, revealing sharp teeth. “Even if I have to do it one meal at a time.”

The guard dangling from the overseer’s grasp lets out a whimper, and a rush of urine pours out from the armor around his crotch.

The guard behind me snickers.

“Enough fooling around,” The overseer bellows. “Get these groups separated.” The overseer hangs around long enough to ensure the task is being performed before he hauls the wailing guard into a small tunnel to the side of us.

Once the overseer is out of sight, the guard behind me mutters. “Filthy half-breeds. As if goblins weren’t bad enough, they had to breed them with our women to create beasts like that.”

“Shut up,” snaps another guard. “If he hears a comment like that, we are all done for. It is not up to us to judge the decisions of Emperor Darkmor.”

“I hate transport duty.” A young guard whines as he unlocks the chain where the overseer had indicated earlier.

“It could be worse,” grunts an older guard with an impressive beard.

“How?”

The old guard reveals a wicked grin as a scream emanates from the tunnel. “We could be that guy.”

The guards release a chorus of laughter and I grit my teeth. In many ways scarlet guards are as bad as goblins. At least Goblins don’t pretend to be anything other than the monsters they are.

Our line is finally separated, and the other group is led down the tunnel. I do a quick count and grimace. Their line is smaller. Which means our line will be facing more than just human opponents. My chances of survival just got lower.

An old guard barks a command, and the line resumes our weary trapeze. My foot finds an unseen rock, and I stumble, the heavy chains pulling me forward. I land heavily on my knees, grateful for my tough leather pants.

A guard grabs me by the scruff of my shirt and shoves me back into line. “Open your eyes, you idiot.”

I bite back a retort, and focus on keeping up. It is like idiot is that guy’s favorite word.

The loud grating of grinding metal echoes around us as a section of the wall moves slowly away from a cave wall. The open gate reveals a dark and windy tunnel.

We file down the steep tunnel, struggling to keep our balance on the loose gravel covering the ground. But even with our best efforts, feet slip, and the clink of chains echoes through the dark space. We follow the narrow tunnel to the bottom, and I look into a chamber scarcely taller than myself. Even the guards that led us here have to stoop to fit inside. They light more torches and hold them as high as they can in an attempt to fight the deep darkness inside the chamber.

The screech of metal on metal fills the space ringing off the walls as the door we came through seals. Without the fresh air blowing down the tunnel my nose is assaulted by the stench of charred flesh.

We half walk, half crawl our way through the space—this place wasn't built for the comfort of humans. Shadows of smaller creatures dart around the edges of the light cast by the torches. The clicking of their long claws on the stone floor does nothing to settle my nerves.

Undeterred by the beasts lurking in the dark, the guards force us over to a rock wall and chain us there. One of the monstrosities dashes from the darkness into the firelight, sensing helpless victims. Eight skinny legs attach to its spine at odd angles, struggling to carry its hairy body. The monster ignores the armed guards and weaves among us, snapping at our ankles and tearing at our clothes, its many eyes glinting eerily in the firelight.

A shiver spreads across my skin, like a thousand little bugs running for cover. Arachnidias are malicious. Unlike other creatures that kill for food and survival, this species kills for fun. Slaughtering their helpless prey in horrific ways and then leaving the remains scattered in the dirt. This one is large enough to be a serious threat to us.

As if sensing my attention, the disgusting thing rushes toward me. It lifts its body onto its hind legs, waving its front limbs menacingly in front of me. Long hooked feet catch my clothes with every swipe. I wrap my hands around the chains binding my arms above my head and kick viciously out at the giant spider. The beast lets out a shriek that set my insides crawling as its glittering eyes size me up. After a tense moment it decides I'm too much effort, and the Arachnidia scuttles down the line, hooked feet clicking with every step.

It lunges at the man next to me and bites into his leg. He cries out in pain and frantically shakes his leg, trying to dislodge the beast, but this only deepens the Arachnidia's hold. Blood dribbles from the sides of the monster's mouth and its eyes glitter almost happily in the firelight.

The guard's roar with laughter. Furious, I fight against my own chains. Pain flares through my wrists as I stretch as far away from the wall as I can manage. Finally, I wedge my boot between the beast's mouth and the man's leg, and we pry off the monster together.

The creature falls onto its back, its many legs grasping at the air as if that will somehow provide enough friction to turn it over. It changes

tactics and rocks from side to side. Within a few moments, the creature manages to flip itself back over and launches itself at the man again. I am ready for it this time, and I land a solid kick to the Arachnidia's body as it comes into range. The power of my kick sends the creature sprawling in the dirt just inside the ring of light.

The guards finally tire of the game, and one shoos it away, saying, "You can have the scraps that are left of them later."

The man beside me pales and sends me a jerky nod of thanks. He is already shaking. Chances are the venom will kill him before he even enters the arena we had been brought here to fight in.

A loud roar erupts from a group of guards, and they all yell at once, one of them pointing at me. They squabble for a moment before the angry guard peels away from the group and makes for me. I tense up as he approaches and there is nothing I can do as he lands a solid punch to my stomach. My body folds as the heavy blow pushes the wind from my lungs. I grit my teeth, determined not to let him hear me cry out.

The man straightens and slicks back his oily hair. "I lost six gold coins because of you." He grins as he eyes me, lingering on my hips and breasts. "Perhaps later, I will find some way for you to repay me."

I fight back the grimace that tries to break across my face and hope that he thinks I am completely unmoved by his threat.

He looks over me one last time before he struts back to the group of guards. Grumbling, he drops six gold coins in the waiting hand of a smiling comrade. The betting doesn't stop there. The guards walk up and down the line sizing us up, placing bets on who they think will come back from the Arena alive. They are loud in their speculations about who and what we will have to fight. I should be used to it by now, but my blood boils. It is unpleasant enough knowing I am in line for my death. The last thing I want is to know how much money a guard will make from it.

One guard leaves the group and inspects a line of small, wheeled cages. He gives each pen a good shake, ensuring they are sturdy and ready for use. Those cages will confine us when we are transported into the arena to fight whatever awaits us there. Most gladiator fights are between two slaves. But occasionally, we are forced to fight beasts. Creatures bred for their ferocity. Few gladiators survive those battles.

Cheers erupt from above us, and from the sound, the spectators have taken their seats and await their morning entertainment. A man in fine

armor and impressive shoulder pads walks past, inspecting the line. An officer. He stops and points to a well-built man with shoulder-length black hair. A group of guards grab the man and hold him with more force than necessary as they unlock his chains from the wall. The moment his bound hands are free, the man fights them. He pushes them away, landing a solid punch to the nearest guard and the man crumples. But it is hard for a man in chains to overpower four armored men with batons.

Eventually, he relents under their beating. The guards shove him in a cage and leave him there for further inspection.

A small red goblin waddles out of the darkness and up to the cage, munching on a chunk of overcooked meat. He kicks the cage and it rattles, the man groans and sits up glaring at the red goblin. The goblin peers at him through the bars for a long moment before he scribbles on his clipboard. The fat goblin waddles toward us peering at each of us in turn.

The creature's wide wrinkled snout is covered in tiny bristles of oily hair, leaving the tiniest amount of room for their small watery eyes and long jagged teeth to be jammed into the remaining space. Goblins are not evolution's finest creatures.

Seemingly satisfied he barks an order in a high-pitched voice, and the cage is pushed into the Arena. The iron gate slides open revealing a blinding light before it shuts behind him plunging us back into darkness.

The gate does nothing to muffle the noise of the crowd. The sounds of their excitement paint gruesome imagery of the fight taking place. I grit my teeth and stare at the floor, doing my best to ignore everything around me. A drop of water falls on my neck and runs down my shirt, creating a wave of shivers as it warms itself against my skin.

The battle ends with a roar and a guttural scream of pain. Slowly the gate is opened blinding me with light, I squint my eyes attempting to see what battleground they have for us this time.

I grunt in frustration as my streaming eyes refuse to focus on anything that isn't the blinding light.

The screech of wheels accompanies the empty cage as it is wheeled back in. The metal barrier is closed with a thump and the guards return to our line.

I crouch as low as I can and watch in silence as people are taken one by one. The collection time is signaled by a monstrous roar of enthusiasm

and chanting from the crowds above. The numbers in the line dwindle until only I remain.

The guards watch the fight through windows in the gate, their raucous laughter only occasionally drowned out by the creatures in the stands screaming for more blood.

I recall the stories my mother used to tell me about a person filled with a gift who would one day rise to free us from Emperor Darkmor's grasp. I sigh. That person better hurry up and rise, it is very likely I will die in a gladiator match before this individual shows up.

I pull at my chains, hoping they had forgotten to lock them. They clink with the movement and the lock wriggles into my vision. It's shut tight. I'm out of luck. I let out a sigh, the chance had been slim.

I shift my feet to expel the sensation of pins and needles that riddle my legs. A shriek comes from above, and I cringe. Judging by the increased anticipation from above, the current entertainment had just ended. And I'm up next.

I curl my lip. "Barbarians," I mutter under my breath, disgusted by the world I'm forced to live in.

"Where is Gladiator 1408?" calls a high-pitched voice.

My eyes dart over to the source—a sickly green goblin with tiny brown eyes. He stands nearby, not even two feet tall, clad in a dirty yellow tunic that is far too tight for him. I eye his massive flabby stomach peeking out from under the hem with distaste.

Two guards unlock my chains from the wall, ensuring the heavy iron handcuffs are still clasped around my wrists. I resist them, but one holds up a heavy metal baton, and I stop. It's reckless to get myself hurt now. I would still have to go into the Arena.

The goblin glances up from his clipboard to squint at the world around him. "Where is Gladiator 1408?"

I'm shoved forward, and I glare down at the poorly dressed goblin. "My name is Claire."

This earns me a heavy blow from the guard baton across my shoulders. I let out a small noise of surprise and level the guard with a glare.

The goblin grunts and squints up at me, his eyes watery from the effort of focusing in the firelight. After a moment he decides I am

unimportant and addresses the guards behind me. “Put 1408 in a cage. She is up next.”

A pair of guards push a cage toward me, and it creaks ominously. I can't help it, I try to back away. Seasons of experience have taught me what's coming next, and I want no part in it.

I'm picked up and forced into the cage. The door slams shut behind me and the whole metal frame rattles from the force. I struggle to find footing on the bars below. They are slick and coated in moisture. After a few moments of slipping, I manage to find my balance and turn around as best I can in the cramped space. The cage itself is barely big enough for me to crouch in.

Defeated, I take a deep breath and shove my arms between the cage bars, holding my hands out so the shackles can be removed. It's better to cooperate now and have them removed than go out there with them on.

The guards remove the shackles and await further instruction. We remain still for a long time. My legs cramp from the awkward position, and an overbearing metallic scent fills the space. A torch is moved closer and I inspect the bars at my feet in the flickering light. I discover the reason for their slickness. They are coated in blood.

I adjust as much as I can and press my face against the cold bars, trying to escape the scent surrounding me.

At last, the order is given for my cage to be wheeled into the Arena. The guards push me towards the cave opening flooded with harsh light. As we approach, the gate jumps open. Me and my cage are shoved into the light, and the gate drops between me and the dark holding pen with a loud crash. Trapping me in the blinding world on the other side of the door.

Blinking, I try to take in my surroundings, but the harsh light makes it difficult to keep my eyes open for more than a few moments at a time.

I inspect my sore wrists where the chains rubbed them raw, but I can do nothing about it now. Grumbling, I peer through the bars and look around the Arena, the Arena lights give everything a strange color and I blink my watery eyes trying to shed the temporary difficulty this bright light has given me.

I carefully shift my feet on the cage bars and study the Arena layout, but my eyes are inevitably drawn to the enormous high rise stands filled to bursting with goblins. Skin tones of every color speckle the stands, filling

the brown bleachers with all the colors a painter would never choose for their art.

Amongst them, though in far fewer numbers, are off duty scarlet guards and other creatures unfamiliar to me. From the stands come horrid screeches that can only be interpreted as cheers. No doubt brought on by the excitement of the battle to come. This is the last match of the day.

Goblins everywhere push and shove each other trying to get a better view. Many of them exchange blows, trying to get the seat of someone in front.

A loud screech signals the rusted front of my cage opening and draws my attention away from the stands. Hesitantly I step from the cage and onto the sticky sand.

I peer at the other end of the Arena, but both gates are closed. One is for human opponents and the other for beasts that could be unleashed at any moment if a gladiator battle is too boring. I scan the ground in search of a weapon, and I spot a glint of metal. I stoop and grasp the hilt of a dagger half buried in the sand.

At least this time they left me a weapon. Every so often only one gladiator receives a weapon— usually when that gladiator has ticked off the guards that bring them in. I have been unlucky enough to go through that twice before.

I shake my legs out, dispelling the pins and needles. I brush a strand of earth brown hair away from my eyes, wishing I had anything better to tie my hair back with than an old, knotted bandage.

My eyes dart around my surroundings, collecting information. Like the triangularly shaped battleground, the lack of obstacles, and the gritty orange sand beneath my leather boots. I guess they chose a desert theme for today's fight. My eyes linger on the blood stains spread throughout the Arena. I crinkle my nose. More will be added to the sand before the day is over.

The sounds of thousands screaming draw my attention once more to the stands. I watch them clap, bellow and stuff their faces with the food the slaves carry on large trays. I drag my eyes from the monsters to a rare addition to the Arena.

In the center of the stands, sits a dark grey platform. Scarlet officers surround the perimeter, and they stand at attention. In the middle rests a

throne made of bones. The throne is grotesque and intimidating, but I suspect that's probably the point.

A figure lazes on the throne, its face hidden in shadows. I squint, just making out the shape of twisted horns, the suggestion of blue skin, and a high-backed cloak.

Emperor Darkmor.

My heartbeat roars through my ears, and my hands curl into fists as I stare up at the creature whose fault it is that I am here today. The one who is truly responsible for the blood stains strewn across the sand.

My hand brushes the covered brand on my left thigh. My fingers run across leather feeling the bubbled skin beneath that marks me forever with the hated slave number 1408. This number is accompanied by a sword. Together they mark my identity and role. A symbol of my enslavement as a gladiator and a captive of Emperor Darkmor.

Though it's hidden under my worn leather pants, I'm always aware of its presence and the reason for it. I glare up at the platform.

A cheer announces the arrival of my opponent, and I pull my eyes from the platform to a man strutting across the Arena like he was born for this moment. Along the way, he stoops to pick up a weapon, and I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse. When he rises, he holds a heavy wooden two-handed mallet, which hardly seems fair.

I grip my dagger tightly and work my jaw.

He is a big man. Even from a distance, I can tell he's taller than me, and muscles bulge everywhere, each of them fighting for dominance as the man moves through the Arena. It's like he is made entirely of muscle. How did he get enough food to support all that muscle?

I glance at the roaring crowd. It is not unusual for goblins to bestow gifts on their favorite gladiators. Even I have received a few meals from them. Usually, after the guards had taken what they wanted first. Is it possible this man has enough supporters to feed him? Or is he a willing gladiator? The son of a scarlet guard who elected to fight in the Arena for glory?

I push the thoughts away. It doesn't matter. He is my opponent, willing or not. If I want to survive, it will have to be through his loss.

Scars litter the man's body, clear signs of how many battles he has fought. Or rather how many he has won.

His dark brown pants stand in contrast to his bare chest. Ice blue eyes stare at me, and even from this distance, I find them unnerving.

They look me over, assessing me, deciding if I am a threat. My opponent flashes an easy smile, runs his hands over his short beard and turns to face the crowd.

The beings in the stands go nuts and chant, “2013!” over and over again.

The man spins in a circle holding his arms open as he stares up at the stands, and the creatures there lap it up. As he turns, I notice a slight limp on his left leg. Perhaps it is an existing injury? Using his injury against him is an advantage I will have to consider if I have any hope of making it out of the Arena alive.

I’m not stupid. I can see how strong this man is, and I have little chance of overpowering him. It will be intelligence, not strength, that will win me this fight.

The giant man lowers his arms and closes the distance between us.

He throws his heavy hammer from hand to hand and sends me a savage grin. “Ready to play?”

I grit my teeth and ignore the question. I ready my dagger and step into a fighting stance, waiting for the battle to begin.

Chapter Two

A loud clang echoes through the Arena, signaling the start of the battle. My boots crunch in the sand as I spin away from my opponent attempting to keep a healthy distance between us. He will crush me like a bug if he gets hold of me. And, from the smile on his face, it looks like he will enjoy doing it too.

The man misreads me and pounds his chest with his fists. "What's the matter, Girly? Don't like playing against the big leagues?"

He reaches for me, and I land a solid punch to his chin, the prickles of his beard grinding against my knuckles.

"This isn't a game," I hiss.

The man wipes his lip and laughs darkly. "Oh, but it is. And when I tear you apart, I will enjoy the sweet melody of your screams." He pauses and winks at me. "Or maybe I will keep you alive, and request you are given to my biggest goblin supporter."

He gives me a malicious grin, and his eyes sparkle with a sinister joy. My stomach gives a sickening lurch. This isn't just trash talk to get inside my head. This deranged man is actually having fun.

He swings and I respond too late to his attack and his hammer clips my shoulder and rattles my body like an earth quake. I stumble, duck and thump him in his injured leg with the butt of my blade. He lets out a bellow and staggers back, his hand awkwardly clutching his thigh.

I stoop to pick up a handful of sand, and the grains cling to the blood on my hand as I rise to my feet. When had I started to bleed? That hammer must have broken the skin.

My opponent rushes towards me. I throw the sand at his face, and it explodes into millions of fine particles, sticking to his skin and clinging to his eyes. He runs blindly, and I effortlessly sidestep his charge as he blunders past. The man bellows in outrage and wipes his face, trying to claw the sand from his streaming eyes.

I steel my courage and dart behind him, swiftly kicking the back of his legs. My sharp jabs send him tumbling to his knees. On his way down his massive hand closes around my forearm and I am dragged forwards. The pungent odor of his sweat bombards me and rivals the metallic scent of the blood in the sand near my feet.

He twists, grains of sand still in his reddened eyes. Using my arm as a guide, he blindly punches. His grip prevents me from escaping, and his gigantic fist fills my vision. Black spots erupt behind my eyes, and I stagger from the force of the blow. He releases his hold on my arm, and I stumble back trying to regain my bearings.

My opponent climbs to his feet, sand still streaking his face. A blotch of red stains his pants where I struck him. I've reopened an old wound. He holds my gaze as he lowers his hand to his injured leg. He squeezes the injury, and blood oozes out onto his palm. Horrified, I watch as he wipes the fluid across his face, using the streaked scarlet handprint for war paint.

He laughs and flashes me a grin. "Now we're matching."

I wipe my forehead, clearing away the blood as it streams from the gash above my eye.

The man lets out another rumble of dark laughter. I use his distraction to swing my leg around and boot the hand grasping the hammer. It flips through the air, making a soft thud as it lands in the sand, too far away for my opponent to reach without turning his back to me.

He reaches for me angrily with his meaty fists. "Come here!"

With my dagger, I step back and slice at him in a wild arc. He grunts and retracts his hand. I glance down at my blade—the tip is stained with red.

"You're in for it now, Girly," 2013 huffs between large breaths.

With a loud roar, he springs forward, grabs the blade of my dagger in his fist, and wrenches it from my hand. He throws it off into the distance, howling in anger. He turns to me, his massive chest heaving and his eyes glinting with murderous rage.

A single bead of blood squeezes through the wound in his arm, and races to his hand to mingle with the new blood there. It lingers for a moment before it falls to the sand, joining a small pool of crimson at his feet. He clenches his jaw, and a low rumble crawls from his throat.

My heart hammers in my chest and a fresh wave of sweat erupts across my skin. The muscles in my legs twitch against my own violation, and I turn in the gritty sand and bolt. The giant man leaps after me in close pursuit, howling in rage. His anger gives him speed, and I'm not sure I can outrun him for long. There isn't anywhere to run anyway, every direction leads to a dead end.

I change my path and head for the nearest wall. 2013 is now so close that each pass of his hands skims my shirt. I speed up, my feet slipping in the loose sand. As I approach the wall, I manage a full sprint, doing my best to ignore the goblins peering over the edge. I run three steps up the barrier using my momentum and push off hard. I somersault in the air above the angry man and land lightly in the sand behind him.

I pounce on his back and wrap my right arm around his thick neck, using my other to lock it in place. Scrabbling I push my knees into his back and use the angle to increase the amount of force I can apply to his throat.

The big man scratches brutally at my arms, tearing at the flesh. His sharp nails cut through my skin, leaving smears of our blood all over me. But his struggles are in vain. I have a grip on him so forceful I cannot be pried off. The fear of what will happen to me if I let go gives me strength. 2013 stops ripping the skin from my arms and tilts his head as if an idea has just struck him. The side profile of his reddened face reveals a glinting bloodshot eye and a wicked smile.

Whatever is causing that smile, I'm sure it won't be good for me.

2013 takes a few steps, staggering under our combined weight. He steadies himself and takes in a struggling breath. Turning, he runs at top speed towards the wall and throws himself at it. He twists his body as he jumps, so I'm between him and the wall.

The impact makes a sickening crunch. All the air is forced from my lungs. I grit my teeth and hold on for dear life. A metallic flavor fills my mouth and I spit a mouthful of blood into the sand. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up.

But then 2013 falls, grunting as his knees hit the sand. But I can't let him go until he has lost consciousness.

His ice blue eyes meet mine, and his strangled voice escapes his purple lips. "You fight well, Girly."

I harden my heart, move my feet to the sand and apply all the pressure I can manage on the big man's throat.

2013's arms go slack, and his head rolls forward in my arms.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the giant man, removing my arms and dropping him at my feet. I step back just in case it's a trick. I wipe the sweat and blood from my brow, watching and waiting. But the man lays still in the sand.

There is a brand burnt deep into the flesh of his left shoulder: '2013' with a large 'S' above it for Scarlet Guard. He was a voluntary gladiator. Somehow, that doesn't provide any consolation for what I have done. I commit the number to memory like so many times before.

I can't let my gaze linger. I must always appear strong. Weak gladiators are publicly executed, or worse, given to the goblins. I've been told stories about the goblins and even heard for myself the screams that come from the nearby caverns when they are given a new victim. My neck prickles as the tiny hairs rise, as if trying to distance themselves from my thoughts.

Shaking myself out of my dark thoughts, I chance one last glance at the still body at my feet. My stomach churns, and the unpleasant burning of bile climbs up my throat.

I raise my eyes to the stands above, and the crowd's deafening roar rushes to my ears. The monsters in my vision clap, laugh and fight with each other over lost bets. They love it when smaller gladiators beat the bigger ones.

It's disgusting.

The electric lights that beat down on my back are hot, and I can feel my tender skin screaming in protest. I lift my arm, taking care to be slow. Even with my delicate movement, a sharp pain stabs my chest. The wall sandwiching must have broken some ribs.

"Great," I mutter with an eye roll, lowering my arm and trying not to wince.

A mouldy green goblin ambles to the edge of the grey platform and waves to get the crowd's attention. Thanks to magic, the goblin's voice drifts over the stands and drowns out the bickering masses.

"Well, what an exciting match! Gladiator 2013 wasn't at all prepared for how feisty 1408 is."

The monstrous crowd laughs and roars its approval. I stare at the ground and my stomach gurgles as if it might throw up the goblin's words in an attempt to expel them forever from my mind and body.

"We are lucky today to be joined by our mighty leader Emperor Darkmor, who has decided to flatter us with a few words," the goblin squeaks, holding out a flabby arm toward Emperor Darkmor.

Emperor Darkmor rises from his seat and struts to the platform's edge. His blue skin stands out in contrast to the moldy green goblin beside

him. I stare up at the loathsome being as he preens his long black hair around twisted grey horns. I don't know what Emperor Darkmor is. He's a monster, I'm sure of that, but he doesn't resemble any other creature in his underworld domain. He could be human if it wasn't for his horns and goat-like legs. He is tall and skinny, or maybe that's just in contrast to the squat goblin beside him.

It is hard to believe a being with such a weak frame can control thousands. Yet, it isn't his frame that controls us—his magic is what holds us down. His sorcery is what his followers crave.

Emperor Darkmor looks out at the crowd of goblins as they wait for him to speak, their excitement palpable.

"This is a momentous occasion," Emperor Darkmor announces in a deep voice. "This is 1408's one hundredth gladiator match."

The crowd goes nuts, and my throat tightens. One hundred matches mark me as a mass murderer.

Emperor Darkmor smiles and raises his hands. "As you know, not many gladiators make it to one hundred matches, as they have a tendency to die before then."

The crowd laughs too loudly at his joke, and I have to wait long minutes for their laughter to die down.

Emperor Darkmor gestures towards me. "In celebration of her hundredth match, 1408 has been promoted to the status of Prime Gladiator. She will receive extra privileges, new armor, and you will encounter her more often in the Arena!"

What a prize. An increase in the frequency of my gladiator matches is the last thing I need. No one reaches the status of Prime Gladiator and stays there long.

The goblins chant Emperor Darkmor's name like he had just given them a great gift. Emperor Darkmor gives a small bow and vanishes in a magical cloud of black light. The goblin announcer squeaks and scampers away as if the black cloud had burnt him.

A gate slams and I turn to see four-armed Scarlet Guards enter the Arena. They approach me with caution. Probably because revved up gladiators are extremely dangerous. Or, maybe it's because I am well-known for giving broken noses to whoever tries to chain me up after a match.

Two of the guards give me a wide berth, each one grabbing an arm of the giant man. They drag him through the Arena towards the exit, his body leaving a deep trail as it scuffs through the sand. I watch them for a moment before turning toward the two remaining guards and holding out my hands.

The older guard shoves the younger one toward me. The man pauses. His armor is too big for him and awkwardly hangs over his body. He gulps and approaches with short, slow steps, like I'm some kind of wild animal. He holds the iron shackles out, the chain between them clinky softly.

I'm tired, sore, and in no mood for the chaos that will ensue if I break the young guard's nose. So, I stand still and let his shaking hands snap the cold metal around my raw wrists. He fumbles with the lock, and the clasp clicks. He jumps back, his hands over his head and his face scrunched up as he prepares for an attack that never comes.

He opens his eyes a crack, realizes he isn't going to get hit and scampers over to the other guard before I can change my mind. I almost feel sorry for him. Neither man makes a move towards me.

I roll my eyes and trudge towards the Arena exit. The older guard gives me a sharp shove from behind, trying to make it seem like he is in charge of the situation. Apparently, he's much braver now that I'm restrained, and he's behind me.

Another shove to my lower back causes me to stumble. A low, frustrated growl arises from my throat as I turn to face the two guards. The look on my face has them taking a few hasty steps back.

After they retreat a respectable distance, I resume the slow walk to the infirmary. The adrenaline is wearing off, and with it comes a sickly tickle in my throat and the uncomfortable churning of my stomach that accompanies it. More sensations to add to the unpleasant pounding in my head and the ache of my ribs.

Blood trickles down my face, rolling across my cheek and down my neck, tugging on every fine hair on its travels, as it does its best to cling to a spot and remain there. It has been many seasons since I was last punched in the face. I really should have seen that blow coming. Under normal circumstances, I would have been more guarded.

Perhaps the subconscious worry about my mother's upcoming review put me off my best defense. But still, I managed to survive this round, and

with any luck, I'll get out of the infirmary in time to see my mother before her slave shift starts.

With that in mind, I walk a little faster.

Chapter Three

The guards drag me along a worn dirt path lined with high fences of barbed wire. We weave around the natural pillars that stretch up into the darkness of the cavern. My body is riddled with pain, and walking isn't a pleasant task, but the guards still shove me. By this point, I am almost too tired to walk.

We make our way towards the infirmary where my medical status is to be assessed by other slaves. Every slave has a job. We are placed into roles based on previous skills or the father's capabilities. As a slave, you must do well in the position you are given. If you aren't useful, you are expendable. Emperor Darkmor's followers are more than happy to witness and participate in public executions and the torture of slaves who have outrun their usefulness.

We follow the narrow pathway around the last corner and come face to face with the massive gate that separates the Arena from the slave compound. A high building rises above the thick barbed fencing, so brightly lit it stands out in the darkness like a beacon. This building and the Arena are the only two buildings with power that I have any contact with. On the other side of the Arena stands a large city, a place for Emperor Darkmor's free citizens.

I have been there a few times, as gladiators are frequently put on display to allow those who bet in the arena to inspect potential assets at their leisure. The whole city is the brightest thing inside the cavern.

In front of the gate sits a crude little mud hut for the guards who watch the entrance to the compound. The door is open and reveals a glimpse of a cooking fire and a small table. My eyes travel to the four guards posted nearby, all of them looking bored as they sharpen their swords or pick at their teeth with daggers.

A tall, lanky guard rises and stumbles about. Exaggerating the way, I walk because of my injuries. His display has the other guards rolling around in laughter, and I have to wait for them to be done snickering before I am allowed to leave. At last, we pass through the gates, following the rough path to the entrance of the most prominent building within the compound. The guards push me through the heavy wooden doors, and we enter a large white room filled with occupants.

Crude medical cots line the walls, five with patients in them. Two goblins lay in beds next to one another, one sporting a bruised eye and a broken snout. The other with a bandage wrapped around his head, a small black stain seeping through at the front. Typically this room is only for slaves. It is unusual to see some of Emperor Darkmor's free citizens here. My best guess is they got into a fight over something trivial in the Arena.

Two other cots hold bloodied gladiators, still in their armor. I recognize them from the line up this morning. One gladiator is missing an arm. The stump is wrapped in a bloody gauze that steadily drips onto the dirty floor. Two middle-aged men work nearby, to heat up a metal sheet to cauterize the wound. I grimace. I really hope I'm not here when they do that.

Another gladiator sits on a bed's edge, with a long knife in his leg. He nods to me in greeting, while a middle-aged woman tends him as best, she can. But she is frequently interrupted by the goblins who insist on more care than they actually need.

I can't tell what is in the last occupied bed. A sheet is drawn over the body. Only the woman next to it filling out a form, and the spatter of blood across the sheet gives any indication to the gruesome sight underneath. But I am pretty sure whoever is under it is extremely dead.

I search the other cots in the room, looking for the man I fought in the Arena, but he isn't here. There are only two reasons why a gladiator doesn't go to the infirmary after a battle. Either they died in the Arena, or the guards decided they were beyond repair and executed them. The man was dragged out before me, and he isn't here.

My stomach twists and nausea sweeps through me. Even after one hundred matches, guilt and remorse riddle me every time. I learned many seasons ago that killing doesn't get easier with experience.

I shake my head sadly. Will anyone remember him? Did he have a family? In a few days, his goblin supporters will move on and never think of him again. Did anyone in this awful place even know his name? Or did he die as just another number, like so many before him? Perhaps he will be treated differently because he was a willing gladiator, the son of a scarlet guard. I cling to that tiny hope and examine the cots around me.

Slaves from the medical faction work throughout the room, their light green jumpsuits stand out against the white walls and the blood on the floors. They tend to the injuries of gladiators and fill out paperwork. I

have no idea why they are required to wear such bright clothing. Perhaps it makes them easier to round up in case of an emergency.

These slaves are under the supervision of an enormous snake-like creature with a broad chest, and muscular arms that are far too long to be sensible. My eyes travel over its body, taking in the flat head and the eight-foot-long form of a cobra. I'd have to be blind to miss the vibrant violet scales. Intense discomfort and apprehension prickles at my spine.

Snake people are prevalent in positions of power. Probably because they thrive on the terror of others, and are extremely talented when it comes to causing fear. In the eyes of Emperor Darkmor, this makes them well suited for the job. These snake-like creatures call themselves Naga.

This Naga is covered in dark purple horizontal stripes, which make it clear he is male. Male Naga are well known for their short fuses and violent tendencies. This one looks like he has just about reached the end of his fuse, and it probably has a lot to do with the squabbling goblins at the back of the room.

An older woman in her forties with marbled brown and grey hair approaches me, her green jumpsuit stained with splashes of blood. The woman's blue eyes take in my battered appearance with pity. Her eyes linger on the drying blood on my face and glance over my slumped posture.

"Sit," the older woman requests and gestures to an empty bed beside her.

The guards let me follow the woman to the bed and stand to attention at the door. Making sure I don't make a run for it. I almost laugh. As if I would get far in my current state.

I glance around the room and notice all the guards in similar states of attention. I have never seen the guards so focused. They usually lounged about, upset the medics, and gawked at the injured gladiators. I put this strange behavior down to the unmistakably aggravated Naga. I guess he makes them nervous.

The older woman steps into my field of vision and inspects my wounds. After a quick once over, she takes a wet cloth from a bowl on the metal cart beside the bed. The medic wipes the blood and sand from my forehead, uttering various hmm's and ha's as she inspects my head wound. Satisfied the injury is clean, she turns to pick up a needle and thread. The

woman lets out one last hmm and sets about suturing the gash on my head, just above my eyebrow.

I am not given any medicine to help with the pain. I sit on the bed in silence and ignore the stinging sensation as the hot needle pierces my flesh, and the thread following it drags through my skin, pulling at my already tender wound.

I focus on breathing and force myself to remain still for each of my four stitches. The medic's job is to ensure I live, not to make me comfortable. It's easier to treat minor injuries than train a new slave to fill my position, but that doesn't mean Emperor Darkmor will allow too many resources to be used on a slave.

With the last suture finished, the medic attempts to inspect my chest wounds, but my shackles make it too difficult to remove my armor.

She waves at my guards, and they glare over at us. She calls out, "Remove her shackles, so I can inspect her wounds?"

A guard with a set of heavy keys grudgingly stomps towards us and removes my shackles before returning to his post. The medic takes off my chest armor and inspects the bruises on my back and sides.

The older woman checks my broken ribs, giving them a gentle push here and there. Satisfied I am not going to puncture any internal organs, the medic wraps my chest in a tight bandage to stop any unnecessary movement.

The irritated Naga moves away from the arguing goblins and towards my bed. His lower body grinds across the cobbled ground. Each violet scale emits a horrid scrape as it makes contact with the uneven floor. The unbearable noise only stops when he comes to a halt in front of us.

He looks down at me with a scowl most people would reserve for vermin and addresses the woman beside me.

"Will thisss one live?" He hisses in a thick grating accent that is as repulsive as the noise his scales had made across the cobbled stones.

The medic nods. "Yes. Her wounds are not life-threatening, if she is careful. But she will heal faster if we give her an injection for the wounds on her chest-."

The Naga's hand connects with the medic's face and a resounding crack echoes throughout the confines of the medical room, efficiently stopping all conversation and drawing the attention of everyone in the

vicinity. Even the goblins stop their shoving match to stare at the Naga, their mouths hanging wide.

“Thossse injectionsss,” the Naga rages. “Are not for sslavesss! Are you sssugessting her life iss more valuable than a loyal follower of Emperor Darkmor?” He hisses, his blue tongue darting out to spit all over the medic’s face.

“No of c-course not!” stammers the frightened medic, as she tries to recover from the Naga’s blow. “I only meant, if she could heal faster, she would perform much better at her next gladiator match,” pleads the medic. “Sickly gladiators are poor sport.”

The Naga’s face contorts into one that resembles thinking. Horrible, scary thinking. Everyone in the room holds their breath waiting for the Naga’s decision. Mere seconds pass, but they drag by as if they were an eternity, until finally the Naga’s face relaxes back into its normal state. Which to be honest isn’t any less scary.

The Naga crosses his arms. “Ssseeing the exssstent of thiss oness injuriesss and her sstatuuss ass a prime gladiator, I will allow it. Thiss time. Finisssh treating thiss one and report to the punishment room for ten lassheesss. For asssssuming you can ssspeak in my presssencessse about thingsss you know not,” he commands with a sneer.

Satisfied with the level of pain and terror he has inspired, the Naga slides away, making that terrible grinding sound once more. The room suddenly resumes its normal volume as everyone hurriedly goes back to what they were doing. Everyone except the goblins, who are now sulking in their beds looking anywhere but at each other.

The medic goes to a nearby cupboard and returns with a needle and a bottle of grey liquid. She sets about preparing the injection, her face already showing a burning red three-fingered welt where the Naga struck her.

My stomach tightens. I am responsible for the pain she will soon endure. The medic wipes down my arm in preparation for the injection. I gaze at her and whisper, “Thank you.”

The woman gives me a smile that lights up her face, removing worry lines and revealing a glimpse of the woman’s lost youth. “If this helps you to live for a little longer, all the pain will be worth it.”

The Naga slides past, looking incredibly pleased with himself, a smug grin on his snout. His proximity puts an abrupt end to our conversation.

Returning to her job the medic collects the syringe filled with grey liquid. She injects me with the needle and the liquid burns through my arm and then across the rest of my body. She ushers me off the bed, and I put my armor back on. I turn to the woman, and I give her one last smile. My eyes linger for a moment on the red welt.

I nod my thanks and turn to the guards, who quickly shackle my wrists and rush me from the room. No doubt eager to be away from the Naga and his rage.

The guards push open the heavy wooden doors and march me down a dark and grimy hall in the direction of my cell, giving me the occasional shove to make me go faster. Their pushes aren't doing anything to help the pain in my chest and back. But even so, my breathing is less labored, and I can stand a little straighter. The injection must be taking effect. They work quickly.

Our footsteps echo through the hall. The cold tunnel air bites at me and a wave of goosebumps erupts across my skin. We turn a corner, and I am confronted with the sight of a dark cell.

This is where I have lived since I was four, with my mother and a revolving cast of others. I spend most of my time here. The only exceptions are when I am out training or fighting in the Arena. This is more freedom than most slaves have, but that knowledge doesn't comfort me.

One guard pulls out his heavy metal baton, and the other one unlocks my shackles and clips them to his belt.

The guard holds out his hand. "Armor."

I glare at him and stand still.

"Give it to me, or I will take it from you," he adds flicking his finger at me in impatience.

I take off my armor, taking more time than necessary before I slowly hand it to the guards until I'm standing in my boots, a navy blue singlet, and dirty grey shorts. The cold air of the tunnels clings to my skin, holding me in its icy embrace.

The guard gives me a face. "Boots."

I hesitate, but the look on his face leaves no room for argument. I grumble as I remove the boots and throw them at him. This is the way it has always been. Slaves can't own anything. I earned those clothes in the

Arena with every fight I survived, but rules dictate I can only wear them for Arena matches. It isn't fair.

"In the cell," the other guard rumbles.

I stand unmoving, what my mother calls 'a willful young adult temper' flares into life at the injustice of it all. The guards grow impatient and seize my arms, trying to force me into the cell. I struggle and kick out. Landing a solid connection to the groin of the guard in front of me. He topples to his knees.

Two guards from the nearby station come over to help, and the four of them together force me into the cell. I am thrown roughly to the floor, and a small gasp escapes me as I land on my side, a sharp spike of pain bursting through my chest.

The cell's metal frame rattles as the door crashes into place behind me. I scramble to my feet and glare at the guards as they attempt to help their comrade, who is still on the ground, cupping himself with two hands.

The man climbs to his feet with a grunt and snarls at me through the bars, "You're lucky we are forbidden from harming you outside of the Arena. But I will enjoy watching you get ripped apart in your next gladiator match when someone forgets to give you a weapon."

Suppressing a sigh, I turn into the cell and peer at the floor beneath me. It is covered in layers upon layers of dirt and filth so thick it is hard to tell if the room has ever been clean.

Strong iron bars make up the front of the cell, each of them thicker than my arm, and coated with a layer of orange rust. Massive stone slabs make up the remaining cell walls. They are stacked high, and roughly fitted so small gaps let in the cold cavern air. In essence, they do nothing to keep in any type of warmth.

The stench of sweat, dust, and illness would be overwhelming for most people, but I do no more than wrinkle my nose at the smell.

It's hard to adjust to the darkness after being in the bright light of the Arena and infirmary for so long. I can just make out the shapes of thin, tattered blankets scattered along the floor, marking the sleeping places of fellow prisoners.

I scout through the room, searching for a familiar mass of dark brown curls and the deep, thoughtful eyes that belong to my mother. Hoping she is still here and that she hasn't yet been taken to her shift in the infirmary.

A quiet cough draws my attention away from the blankets at my feet, and I stare into the cells' corner. Blinking, my eyes make the slow adjustment to the dark. I detect a mass of tangled, knotted curls and the source of the cough. My mother lays in the corner, asleep on a tattered blanket. She tosses and turns, trying to avoid something that exists only in her dreams.

I hurry over and wake her, doing my best to be gentle. "Mum," I whisper. "Mum, wake up."

She wakes with a start and springs up, looking around in alarm.

"Claire," she says, and joy fills her face as she leans over to pull me into a warm hug. "You have returned."

She smiles and glances over the stitches and bruises on my forehead. Raising her hand, she cups my face.

"Of course, I'm too stubborn to die," I reply, lifting my hand to hers and gently lowering it from my still sensitive face. "How are you feeling?"

Mother smiles. "Old and cold."

I shake my head, but my reply is cut off as the guards stumble to stand to attention, one of them knocking over the chair he had been lounging on in the process.

A big man strolls in, his heavily muscled frame just as commanding as his presence.

He stops at our cage and sneers through the bars, "Medic 1506 you have ten minutes to prepare for your review."

A bowl of water and a rag is shoved roughly through the bars, sloshing most of its precious contents on the floor in the process.

Mother hurries over to the bowl and hurriedly begins to wipe down her grimy face and arms.

My stomach clenches painfully and I aim my fear and anger at the man in front of the bars. "A review? But she is not due for another week!"

I lock eyes with his ice blue ones and a sense of familiarity tugs at me.

The man cracks his knuckles menacingly. "Now I get the joy of taking something from you as you took something from me."

Anger builds in my stomach like flames, and I stomp over to the bars and glare up at the man. "Surely you cannot force forward a review over a lost bet!"

My mother moves towards me. "Claire-."

“I did not lose a bet.” The man bellows over my mother’s words. I am roughly jerked forwards and slammed into the bars. Pain blasts through my chest and head.

“Sir,” one of the guards begins. “You mustn’t hurt her she is the Prime Gladiator.”

“Silence,” the man bellows, sending spit into my face.

The guard behind him takes a hasty step back and keeps his words to himself.

The guard with the ice blue eyes returns his attention to me and I look into his cold gaze— those eyes are so familiar. My stomach drops as realization settles heavily inside it.

“You took my son from me,” he hisses. “Now I will take the one person you care about from you.”

With that he tosses me back onto the floor as if I were a rag doll, my mother rushes over towards me and helps me sit.

The man with ice blue eyes readjusts his shirt as if our encounter had somehow rumpled his appearance. He casts a half a second glance at my mother. “Your review starts in five minutes.”

With that he struts from view.

My mother turns to me. “What did he mean about you taking his son?”

I wrap my hands around my knees. “He was my opponent in the arena.”

A soft, “Oh,” escapes my mothers’ lips as she pulls me into a hug.

I had saved my life in the arena at the cost of my mothers. “This is wrong!” I hiss.

My mother holds me tighter. “Everything they do to us here is wrong.”

I look up at her, tears stinging my eyes. “Pushing forward a review though.” I bite my lip to stop it trembling. “We were supposed to have another week.”

“I passed the last one, I can pass this one too.” My mother says.

Neither of us point out that the last one wasn’t issued by a man whose son I had just killed. I swallow. “You are the most experienced medic they have. They aren’t going to get rid of you,” I say, and wrap my arms around her.

Reviews are usually seasonal check-ups on slaves to make sure they are still more useful than the cost of their upkeep. If you aren't useful, you are expendable, and the thought they might consider my mother as useless triggers a painful gripping in my heart. The fact that that decision is being led by a man with a personal grievance against me spreads fear through my body.

"Let's not worry about it," Mother chirps, as she turns to sit cross-legged in front of me. "Worrying won't change their decision."

I nod. She is right, worrying won't change the outcome. It will just ruin the precious time we have now.

"Anyway, I have a gift for you," Mother announces as she reaches into her sleeve and pulls a necklace from it.

She went to great lengths to keep it hidden throughout my childhood. Knotting it into her hair and stealing thread from the infirmary so she could stitch the necklace to the inside of her shirt. Those are just a few ways she's managed to keep it hidden from the greedy eyes of those who monitor us.

She holds it out to me. "Your grandmother gave this to me before she—"she pauses the unspoken word *died* hangs in the air. She clears her throat. "In any case, it is time for me to give it to you."

I take the necklace and examine it. At its center, lies a teardrop gem, about the size of my thumbnail. White flecks parade throughout the deep blue gemstone, sparkling and glittering in the flickering light cast by the braziers outside of our prison. Silver strips curl around the stone, holding it to a delicate but deceptively strong chain.

I stare at the glimmering gem. The twinkling colors create a miniature picture of how I imagine the night sky.

"It's beautiful," I whisper. I put on the necklace with a smile.

"It looks good on you," she remarks, smiling at me. "Do you remember the stories I used to tell you when you were younger?"

"The ones about the necklace being magical and giving whoever wears it powers?" I answer with a smile as I remember the bedtime stories Mother used to tell me as a child.

Mother folds her hands in her lap and fixes me with a serious gaze. "Well, they are not made-up stories."

I stare at her blankly for a moment as I recall stories of people who could read minds, tell the future, and move items across rooms with just a

flick of their hands.

I let out a snort of laughter. “Yeah, right. You had me for a moment there.” The stern look on my mother’s face tells me she isn’t joking.

“Those stories are real. I can see glimpses of the possible future,” she reveals. “And it has shown me a world where Emperor Darkmor does not rule us. A world where you save us.”

“Me? I wouldn’t put the fate of a self-sporing mushroom in my hands, let alone the fate of the world and everyone in it,” I joke.

“Claire,” Mother says in a stern voice. “I need you to take this seriously. You must take this to the lands above and discover the power within yourself. Use it to find the others, only then can Emperor Darkmor be defeated, only then can our world Katera be saved.”

“Wait, you’re serious?” I blurt as I stare dumbfounded at my mother. All this time I have been waiting for someone to come save us, and the person I have been waiting on is me?

“It’s a lot to ask of you,” Admits my mother. “Especially since you are twenty-two summers old, but I know you can do it. You’re certainly stubborn enough.”

I take a deep breath. This is madness. “Okay, what do I have to do?”

“Your necklace has five companion pieces. You must find them and work together with their bearers.”

I nod. “Where will I find them?”

“That’s a good question,” Mother replies and offers no further comment.

I rephrase my question, “Do you know where they are, or who has them?”

“Over the seasons, I have only met one other with a necklace. I met him here, in fact. I treated the young man after an accident in the mines. From what I understood he was just a young man doing his best to look after two sisters.”

“Was?”

Mother shifts her knees and leans closer as if speaking too loudly will get us caught. “He tried to leave many seasons ago, escaping with his sisters I believe. He was captured, but his two sisters were not. When I checked his body to declare him dead, he no longer had the necklace.”

“So, the guards took it?”

“Or, he left it with his sisters like I am leaving mine with you now.”

I ignore the implication and I try for a less depressing question, “The necklace gives you the ability to see the future?”

“No. I said it gives me glimpses of a possible future. Different actions have different outcomes,” Mother says.

I lift the necklace and inspect it. “Will I see the future too?”

“Only time will tell,” Mother answers cryptically.

Marching echoes down the hall and announces the approach of guards. Panicked, Mother turns to me, removes my necklace, and places it in my hand. “Claire, you need to leave this place, you have become a Prime gladiator now and your time is limited. Also, it is best to prepare yourself for the fact that I might not return, and I don’t want you to waste away in here, you are too special for that.”

Confused, I stare at her and take her hands. “I don’t understand.”

“You will. I love you Claire, but it is time for you to leave.”

Together we stand face to face and Mother utters the words used for final goodbyes, “May your light guide you to the sun above, to your family and to your love. Our bond is for forever, and goodbyes are not the end. It simply means I’ll miss you, until we meet again.”

She pulls me into a tight hug and holds me until the march arrives at our cell.

A whine of metal signals the door opening, and a gruff voice speaks, “Medic 1506, it is time for your review.”

Mother lets go and gives me a gentle kiss on the cheek. “Be free my little bird, you were born to fly.”

With those final words, she steps away and follows the guards out of the gate, where they shackle her and march her out of sight.

I stand where my mother left me. I clasp my trembling hands and my stomach twists uncomfortably. She spoke like it was our final goodbye. My mind swirls with what she told me.

“Leave?” I mutter as I try to come to grips with the last few minutes of my life.

It’s not like leaving is a choice I can just make. After all who would willingly stay here. I’m a slave inside a heavily fortified and guarded compound. Leaving is not as easy as walking through a gate. Mother knows that.

How am I supposed to deal with this? A magical necklace and orders to save the world are a lot to lump on someone, particularly one who

doesn't even remember what it's like to be free.

I walk over to the cell corner and sink to the floor, exhausted physically and now mentally. I don't know where to begin to sort out the racing chaos inside my head. And I don't want to leave my mother here, even if she's the one who told me to go.

"That's if she comes back," says the nasty voice inside my head. "It's your fault she is suffering through a review right now."

I slam my eyes shut and force the voice into a tiny corner of my mind, doing my best to crush it. But even from there it whispers of my failures.

I lift the necklace and observe the glittering blue gem in my hand. Memories of Mother's stories about the world above flood my conscious, most of them too fantastic to be true. But those stories were of a time before Emperor Darkmor, before the fall of Katera.

A time before my people were enslaved by cruel monsters, who delight in our pain and misery. The worst part is not all of those monsters were creatures of Shadowsoul. Some of them were people thought of as friends, family, and neighbors. I glare at the guards posted outside my cell.

Finding my anger makes it impossible to be idle. I drag myself over to the water trough and drink to fill the aching hunger in my stomach. I cup my hands and do my best to clean the blood and dirt from my body. It takes far more effort than I have the energy for, but I will not sleep with a dead man's blood all over my arms.

I crawl over to the corner I had found my mother in and search the area for the needle I know she keeps here. I flip through her blankets and find nothing. I lift my fingers to the wall and run them along the gaps I can reach. Something pierces my finger, and I grasp it. I look at the needle in my hand and the pinprick on my finger. I suppose I should have known borrowing my mother's things without asking would come at a price.

I rip a piece of material off my blanket and stitch the cloth to the inside of my shorts. Once finished, I return my mother's stolen needle and push the necklace into the new pocket. The waistband hides it well.

I drag myself back over to my corner and slump against the wall, draping my tattered blanket over my knees. I rub my eyes and release a slow breath. Soon the other slaves will return to the cell we share when the bells that signal the end of the digging shift toll. I should try to get some rest while I can.

I will talk to my mother about these thoughts after her review. My heart lightens with the decision and the overwhelming sense of a task too big for one person fades. I rest my head against the wall beside me and fall asleep.

Chapter Four

“Claire.” A voice breaks through my sleep. “Claire, wake up.”

I open my eyes with a smile, expecting to see my mother. A heavy feeling settles in my stomach when I find I have been awoken by my mother’s closest friend instead. It is Kathrine’s job to attend to those who review slaves and ensure their comfort while they calmly decide if someone has out lived their usefulness, I look at Kathrine’s sad blue eyes and my heart sinks.

“Claire, I was in the interview room with your mother,” her voice breaks as she relays the information. “They detained her, regarding an investigation about her lineage.”

I force down the lump in my throat. “Lineage?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kathrine replies, wringing her hands as she peers through the cell bars. “You are in danger, and you need to leave. If they find out who you are...”

A loud clang rings throughout the compound signaling the swap time for the workers, soon the workers from our cell will be returning.

“What do they care about our lineage? We’re no different to anyone else in this damned place.”

“You are the last one,” Kathrine says as if that answers all my questions. “You need to find a way to escape, and if they come for you, you’re better off dead. Check the perimeter fencing, they issued repair orders for it just today.”

With those final words, she moves over to the other side of the cell and settles into sleep.

I put my face in my hands and sit still, fighting the trembles that threaten to overwhelm me. They have detained my mother. She isn’t coming back. The other prisoners share the cell file and search for a piece of ground to rest on. They are a welcome distraction. It doesn’t take long for the soft sounds of slumber to fill the cramped space. I’m not surprised. They only have a few hours before they will once again be forced to work in the tunnels. Gone are the evenings of light conversation and storytelling. Ever since Emperor Darkmor put all working slaves on double shifts, they come in and pass out. Too exhausted to do more than make it to the cell.

This expansion of the tunnels is coupled with whispers of an impending invasion of Solaris, the world above. These rumors suggest Emperor Darkmor is preparing an army for war, and the expansion is to house them while they are being trained.

Pain flares in my heart as thoughts of my mother surge forward. What are they doing to her? What is so important about her—our lineage? And what did Kathrine mean about me being the last one? Thoughts race through my head, chasing each other in circles and doing nothing to bring me any answers.

The young girl next to me shivers in her sleep, and a small cloud of air escapes her. The poor girl can't be any older than ten. She pulls her knees up to her chest and hugs her blanket closer, seeking its pitiful warmth. Her tiny frame rattles with a chesty cough. I pull off my blanket and tuck it around her sleeping form. She settles in her sleep, and her shaking abates.

It hurts to know I will have to leave them here. Taking more people will just increase the chances of getting caught. I know it's the rational way to see it, but it doesn't make me feel any less of a monster for abandoning them. I draw my trembling knees to my chest and hug them tightly, I gaze at the little girl and make a silent vow. A promise. I will come back for them, and for my mother. I will rescue them all.

There is no way to plan for what I am about to do. Planning will just give my brain a chance to tell me all the reasons why escape won't work and isn't possible. All the ways they will torture, kill, and make an example of me if I am caught. Planning also takes time I apparently don't have.

Kathrine and my mother had both been insistent about me leaving as soon as possible. Their insistence made me more than a little nervous. Did my mother know they were going to detain her? Is that why she had chosen today to tell me about the necklace and send me on this quest?

Glimpses of the future? I shake my head. It is too fantastic to be true.

I push the questions from my mind. It doesn't matter if she knew before, and it doesn't change what I must do now. I need a weapon, and now I think about it, supplies would be a bonus. That's my goal—make it to the gearing room. A desire to train will be a good excuse. Luckily, I am allowed to train around the compound whenever I want, as fitter, stronger

gladiators provide more entertainment in the Arena. Probably because they tend to live longer.

I push up from the ground and stand, letting out a quiet hiss as pins and needles burn through my legs. I lift my arms in a stretch, and my ribs shift uncomfortably. But the searing pain I had experienced earlier is now just a dull throb.

Taking care to be quiet, I make my way over to the cell door. I grip the rusted bars and peer through them. Two guards sit on heavy wooden chairs, a card game on the table between them. Judging from the stack of bronze coins in front of the older guard, it would seem he is winning.

“Hey, let me out,” I call out to them. “I need to go train.” I grip the gate bars and shake them with a soft rattle.

The older guard picks food out of his long-matted beard and stares at me like I had just interrupted the most important thing in his universe. Deciding there are no more leftovers to be had from his beard buffet the guard rises from his seat and struts over to the bars. His massive belly hangs out from under his chest armor and jostles with each step the man takes. He arrives at the cell and leans in towards the cell bars, the lingering smell of rotting meat rides on his breath, gusting my face in its desperate attempt for escape. It takes all of my self-restraint not to dry retch.

Beads of sweat dot his face, each of them reflecting the flickering firelight of the braziers around us. The guard narrows his eyes. “And why do you wanna to go train so late at night, Missy?” he asks, blasting my face with his putrid breath and revealing a set of rotting yellow teeth.

I force my face into a neutral expression and fight back a gag. “If your life was on the line in the Arena, would you want your opponents to know your best moves and training strategies? Because I don’t.”

The guard examines me with his black beady eyes, trying to decide if I am worth his time.

“I am Prime Gladiator now. I need to be at my peak to ensure the best possible entertainment for Emperor Darkmor and his citizens.” I add, the words like ash in my mouth.

We stand this way for a few long moments. He grunts and turns to his comrade, a much younger guard with oily blonde hair that falls past his shoulders. “Oi! Quit sneaking from my winnings and come ‘ere.”

The blonde guard reluctantly withdraws his hand, and his face turns pink. He pulls himself from the chair and scurries over to the cell door.

“Go with her,” commands the older guard.

The younger guard responds with a grunt and moves towards the cage door. He makes a show of unhooking the keys from his belt, chooses a large brass one, shoves it into the lock, and twists. The lock clicks and the young guard wrenches the rusted gate open. It creaks in protest. The sound is unbelievably loud in the nights’ relative silence, and a few sleeping prisoners roll over in their sleep, disturbed by the noise.

I step through the gate, and the young guard shackles me. He is going to be a problem. This late at night there will be few other guards to distract him. The guard moves behind me to lock the gate. I will have to ditch him.

“I need my armor and weapons to train with,” I demand.

The older guard mimics me in an exaggerated and high-pitched voice.

I don’t rise to the bait. I will need that gear if I manage to get out—who knows what I will encounter? And even if I don’t get out, more clothing than shorts and singlet would be nice. If I tick this guy off, I won’t be going anywhere.

The senior guard meets my eyes with a stare that would intimidate most others. He turns to the blonde. “Take her to the gearing room and let little Miss Princess ‘ere have her precious training equipment.”

The older guard, laughing at his own joke claps his young comrade on the back and grunts, “Go on Thomas, get on with it.

Thomas gulps, and after a moment’s hesitation, he pulls his heavy metal baton from his hip and grips it tightly. I doubt any fight with this guard will be a fair one.

Thomas marches forward, pulling my chains with his free hand. The braziers hang in their brackets, the flames flickering against the damp walls. The dancing lights cast monstrous shadows along the floors and do little to help the hall’s overwhelming darkness. The cobblestones underfoot are uneven and slimy, and it is hard to walk quickly without slipping. It is immensely unpleasant on my bare feet. Thomas doesn’t slow down, his boots squelching through the gunk, and he has no patience for my attempts at avoiding the slickest stones.

He yanks my chains, and I take a hasty step, right onto a slime-covered stone. The cold goo oozes between my toes and clings to my skin. I crinkle my nose at the terrible sensation and give up on avoiding the slime. The guard's speed makes it too hard to avoid it all anyway.

We round a corner and find two other guards eating a hunk of greasy meat as they lounge on chairs. Their beards and faces glisten with fat. They entertain themselves by flicking scraps at the hungry prisoners inside of the cage they guard. I keep my head down and do my best to avoid their gaze.

We come to a large wooden door with deep cracks, marking it with lines of age, in the middle hangs a dirty metal plaque that reads, 'Gladiator equipment.'

This must be the gearing room. I expected more than the dirty sign and the old wooden door that stands before me. I have never actually been here. Typically my gear is brought to me for matches or training. Maybe this is a perk of a prime gladiator? Getting to choose my equipment and weapons. Or perhaps, I have guards who don't know any better than to let a gladiator loose in the gearing room.

Thomas pushes the door open. Rows of armor and weapons hang around the chamber. A shelf of helmets stands proudly in the middle, and animal harnesses line the wall. Chains and shackles fill two large crates to my right. I turn to the guard and hold out my hands, waiting for him to unshackle me.

Thomas crosses his arms and huffs, "I'm not going to unshackle you until we are in the training area."

I roll my eyes. "How do you expect me to get changed into my gladiator gear?"

Thomas looks at me, and I can see the struggle between protocol and the logic of my question. At last, he unchains me and throws the shackles onto a shelf nearby. "No funny business, okay?"

I nod. I want my gear, and a commotion here will only bring those guards we passed earlier. I move about the room and find my worn leather armor hanging on a frame. It had been hastily wiped down after my last match. Blood still clings to it in patches. I strap it piece by piece over my clothes. I spot a leather bracer on the shelf next to my armor, the same faded brown as mine. My reward for surviving my one-hundredth match. I force the surge of guilt away and strap the leather cuff to my wrist, it slips neatly over my hand. The bracer covers the scratches I earned this morning in the Arena, and part of me wishes I'd had it then. Undoubtedly it will come in handy during future battles, being able to protect one's sword arm is always a bonus.

I eye my boots and shuffle my slimy feet. No way are they going in the only pair of shoes I have. I spot a rag on the floor nearby and use it to clean the grime from my feet before I pull my boots on.

I stride over to the weapons rack and inspect it. I scan the shelf and select a dagger and a short sword. I pass up the larger weapons, mindful of having to carry them with me. I tie the blades to my belt, and my elbow bumps into an old leather bag hanging from a hook behind me. It's small and dusty but sturdy enough to hold supplies. I grab the rough leather bag and open it. The bag is light and will work well for what I need.

"What are you doing?" Thomas asks from the doorway.

It takes all my self-discipline not to jump. I had forgotten about the guard. "Collecting medical supplies. Just in case I get hurt while training. Wouldn't want anyone thinking a guard fresh out of training isn't taking proper care of Emperor Darkmor's gladiators, would we?"

It's a total bluff. We never take medical supplies out when training, but I play on the young guard's inexperience and fear of failure, hoping it will motivate him.

"Why o-of course," stammers the guard. "I only meant you have not packed any water canteens. I will get one."

I cannot believe my luck—water and medical supplies. I turn my back to him and collect bandages from a nearby shelf. Behind them I find a little jar with an aged and yellowed label. I open the pot to find it half filled with thick purple paste. What luck! Paste like this is made from royal blue flowers with vibrant red pollen. These flowers are only found on the surface, far above the caverns of Shadowsoul. These flowers are exclusive to the surface and grow nowhere else, making the cream extremely valuable. The paste is monitored with more caution than slaves are guarded.

I glance behind me at the locked shelf with stacked containers within it. Someone has put this pot on the wrong shelf. Probably a guard who had forgotten the key to the medical equipment room and was in a hurry to leave.

Thomas clatters noisily, and I drop the paste into the bag and turn to face him. Adrenaline pumps through my veins, even a guard this inexperienced will know I shouldn't have this paste. If he wants to look in the bag there will be hell to pay.

He holds out a sturdy water canteen and I take it shoving it into my bag too. I wait, but Thomas shows no indication of checking what I have packed. How this guy got through training is a mystery, he probably has family in high places.

I throw the bag over my shoulder, and the guard shackles my wrists once more before he ushers me from the room.

We exit the passage through two metal doors and enter the training grounds. Flickering torches are placed around the area and light the perimeter. The boundary is a squared off patch of sand, or at least it used to be sand. Now it's hard packed dirt. Upkeep of this place isn't a priority.

I eye the familiar wooden training dummies, dented, and marked by seasons of use and age. The guard removes my chains and drops them by his feet with a thud.

The earthy scent of the training ground greets me, and I take some slight comfort in it. I breathe in deeply, and the fresh smell fills my lungs and replaces the stench of sweat, damp and illness that lingers in the halls of the compound. The area is empty, for which I am grateful. Most gladiators don't train on game days, often choosing to spend time with what remains of their families.

A prickle of tears wells in my eyes, and I have to fight back thoughts of my mother. Now isn't the time for that. I grab my foot and begin stretching my legs, getting prepared for my 'training session.' Halfway through my stretches, Thomas lets out a loud yawn and slumps against the wall, fidgeting with his baton. Clearly demonstrating his distaste for the fact that he has to guard me.

Sensing an opportunity, I start loosening my arms and throw a look at Thomas. "Aren't you going to go back?"

Thomas looks at me uncertain. "I have been charged with watching you," he barks in a monotone voice.

I shrug. "That's not what the other guards do, they always leave." I turn back to my stretches.

"It is necessary I watch you," the guard snaps.

"Sure, it is," I provoke. "Because one person in the compound yard, surrounded by barbed wire fences, regular guard patrols, and three-headed dogs with acid spikes needs guarding."

Thomas gives me a blank face as he tries to process the conversation. This guard isn't the brightest light in the compound.

“The other guards leave?” He asks at last.

I nod. “They go to the mess hall or play games in the guard house.” Just then a burst of veracious laughter fills the darkness coming from the direction on the guard tower near the gate of the compound.

I leave him in silence as I pull my sword from my belt and begin lunges. Thomas looks from me to the guard house in the distance.

A few moments pass. “Stay here. I will be back to check on you later.”

I don’t even turn to look at him as I continue my lunges, a brief nod is all the acknowledgement I give.

I turn to face the training dummy and continue my routine until the guard fades into the distance. “Dumbass.”

I shake my head. Now that I lost my dimwitted escort, I can start searching for a way out of the compound. Preferably one that wouldn’t end with me trapped, mauled or dead. Perhaps I will be able to use the fence like Kathrine mentioned, as long as they haven’t fixed it yet. A glint brings my attention to the shackles on the ground. I glance over to the doors. They are the only way in and out of the training grounds. I glance over at the guard house. Some guards will be in there, but most of the compound guards will be inside the main building.

I pick up the shackles and loop the chains around the door handles fastening the wrist cuffs together. I’m in big trouble if I don’t make it out tonight. If I have my way, I won’t be around long enough for it to be a problem.

I cast one last look at the door and jog towards the boundary and inspect the thick wiring. The fence is a mess of barbed wire. There would be no hope of climbing it, not without getting cut to ribbons.

I eye an upturned bucket and a small red flag by a small hole under the fence. Judging from the size and the sprinkle of purple scales in the dirt under the wire, it’s the work of a Whelping. These tiny dragons are always worming their way into the compound and stealing from our reserves. Without the use of their undeveloped wings, they have to be creative about how they get their food.

It isn’t a big hole, but I should fit. I glance around the dimly lit compound, checking for patrols and anyone who may be curious about what I’m up to. I listen, and a distant roar of laughter informs me the

guards are socializing, and probably drinking instead of tending to their patrol duties.

I kneel on the ground and remove my pack and weapons. I push them into the small hole in front of me. Laying down on my stomach I wriggle into the opening. I struggle through the dirt and it's a tight fit between me and the fence. The barbed wire pulls at my hair, and scrapes at my skin, each little spike attempting to hold me inside the compound. Numerous small cuts tear my flesh, and blood trickles from the tiny wounds.

Halfway through the hole, a siren goes off. I panic and twist in the dirt, searching the compound with my eyes, desperate to know if I have been spotted. I peer through the thick wire fence and can't see any guards yet. But the yard floodlights have come on, and beams of light trail along the ground, lighting up everything in their path. If it isn't me, they are looking for, they will find me soon enough. I need to get a move on.

Turning back to my stomach, I try to edge forward, but my foot won't budge. I force myself to calm down and look at the problem. I twist around to see my boot has become entangled in a section of loose barbed wire. I stare at the looped wire and curse the fencing. I can't reach my boot with my hand to untangle it, and so I wriggle my foot trying to free it.

I jump as many fists pounding on metal doors echoes through the cavern. I return to my task, those shackles won't hold them long.

I give one last vicious jerk, and my boot comes free of the fence. A barb cuts into my calf, and fresh blood spills onto the dirt below me. I struggle through the soil as fast as I can. My hasty exit has earned me a few more scratches, but at last, I'm free. Well, almost.

I still have to escape the perimeter without any guards or cerebi catching me. I check the cut in my leg—it's about an inch long, relatively deep, and looks like it will need stitches, but treating it can wait. I grasp my weapons and tie them on to my belt. A shout from the compound triggers a painful leap of my heart.

I look back and see a guard pointing at me, yelling to his comrades. Sirens wail through the darkness and echo around the cavern. I don't want to be here when they get to this side of the fence.

I turn and run.

Chapter Five

I hiss at the burn in my leg and force myself to keep running. Every step makes the wound pull like its being torn anew. Blood trickles down my boot, and I must be leaving spatters of it across the dirt. I run, stumbling over uneven ground, I have never been outside the compound before. I have absolutely no idea which direction to go in. Well, I have some idea, and it's anywhere but here.

I sprint away from the compound, my heart hammering in my chest as I dodge holes and rocks. Ignoring the burning throb of my injuries and the uncomfortable jostle of the bag on my back. My foot slips into a small hole, and I land heavily on my hands and knees, the rough rock slicing the skin of my palms.

I wince and pull myself back to my feet. I resume my run, but the dim light in the cavern makes it hard to see. I narrowly miss another hole and sweat breaks out across my body. I slow to a more bearable pace. I glance back at the compound, its lights growing faint in the distance. The siren is a feeble wail, swallowed by my heavy footsteps.

The compound is far behind me, but my thundering heart keeps me running. My feet pound with every connection they make with the uneven terrain and my ragged breaths catch at my throat, drying my mouth. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my inhalations, but the panting continues.

A low growl comes from the darkness, accompanied by many footsteps as they thump the ground. My blood runs cold. Only one creature could track me so quickly in the darkness of the cavern. A cerebi, and it's close.

My heart jolts, pounding in my chest, I pick up the pace, and my legs burn in protest. I run at a speed I didn't know I possessed, dodging rocks and holes faster than ever before. Never have I been this scared. Not even in the Arena, and I've been plenty scared in the Arena.

Another growl erupts from the darkness, and I push on. The cerebi is much faster than me. Even if I manage to keep up this pace and stay in front of it, I will tire at some point. I will make a mistake and fall. It is a well-known fact cerebi's are bred for their endurance and brutality. If there is an option, I would rather not witness the cerebi's unique talents.

Taking a chance, I dodge a large boulder and glance behind me. My foot connects with a rock, and I tumble. Throwing my arms out, I land hard in the dirt. A jarring pain shoots from my elbows to my shoulders. I bite the inside of my cheek and let out a small gasp.

I roll over in time to see a giant three-headed dog, its jaws foam and saliva drips onto the ground. Its oily fur glints in the caverns dim light and its muscles ripple with each bound the creature makes as it barrels towards me. Green spikes along the creature's spine quiver with anticipation and shake with each eager bound the animal makes. Bright red eyes take in the sight of its fallen victim and gleam with excitement.

I scramble to my feet and run.

I dodge another boulder and spot a small cave entrance. I head for it, but the beast gains on me with each of its massive leaps. I won't beat the cerebi to the cave. I can let it catch me, or I can turn and fight. I draw my sword and turn to face the beast. It comes to a halt, weary of the weapon in my hand. A rumbling growl crawls from the monster's many mouths. The cerebi throws back its heads, and they howl into the darkness of the cavern.

I slowly back towards the cave and the cerebi matches me pace for pace, all three heads lowered and waiting for me to make a mistake. I can't look back, or the creature will pounce, and so I can only guess the direction of the cave entrance. Footsteps and yelling pierce the dim cavern. Guards.

I throw away all caution and slash at the creature. It steps back and snaps its jaws at my fist. I draw back, and a guard comes from the side, shrieking a battle cry, running at me, his sword held high.

My training kicks into high gear as my brain registers the guard's intent. I will not be going back alive with him. I crouch and push my sword into his stomach as he rushes me. He flips over me, the force of his run and the motion of my sword propelling him forward. He lands on the ground with a thud, pained gurgles spilling from his mouth. I plunge my dagger into his neck, ending his suffering.

The dog slashes its paw across my arm, and I punch it in the closest head. The dog whimpers and retreats. Another two guards appear, and they drop their torches on the ground, setting an eerie light for the scene taking place. I pick up the sword of their fallen comrade and grip it in my other hand—the handle is slick with his blood.

They swing their swords at me, and I work on keeping them between the dog and me. That task alone takes up most of my strength. Blades dance as I concentrate on keeping the guards and cerebi at bay. One guard steps too close and a quick flick of my sword across his neck has him falling to the ground gurgling on his own blood. I quickly take down the last guard. I pull my sword from his chest, and a blow from the side sends me sprawling in the dirt. My swords fly from my hands and land just out of reach. I gasp for breath as the beasts' massive weight settles on top of me.

I struggle. The cerebi's many jaws snap close to my face, and a splatter of saliva coats my skin. I wriggle a few inches, but my bag snags on a rock. Cursing, I try to reach for my weapons, but they are too far away. The beasts' jaws clash at my face every chance they get, and I am forced to turn away from my weapons.

It lunges at me, jaws wide and gaping. I lift my arm in defense and the beast latches onto it. It bites into the flesh, its serrated teeth sink into my limb, and the brute shakes my arm from side to side. Teeth tearing through my bracer like it isn't even there. Thick red blood runs down my arm, escaping from the punctures to drip onto my chest and face.

I take a shuddering breath and struggle to get the dog off, kicking its stomach with my feet. The head latched onto my arm shakes it violently. My whole body shifts and pain flairs through my arm and shoulder as the teeth tear further into my flesh. Using my free arm, I search the dirt. My hand brushes against a hard lump and I grasp it. A rock.

The cerebi whimpers with each thud from my rock, but still refuses to release me. The other two heads snap their jaws at my face and arms. Missing me by the tiniest amounts as I assault the head that holds my limb. I shift under the beast, trying to avoid the advancing jaws. The cerebi grows tired of playing with its prey and lets out a deep rumble. Its vibrant green spines quiver and green acid spills from the tips.

I watch in horror as a drop of green acid slides down the spine and drips off the cerebi's body. Excruciating pain erupts in my thigh as the acid chews through my armor and into my leg. A cry escapes me, and I swallow the bile that rushes up my throat. I thrash in pain as the acid works its way through my leg, and the putrid smell of burning flesh filling my nostrils doesn't help the wave of nausea.

I stare into the cerebi's faces and smash the rock into the nearest head with a sickening crack. The head lets out a yelp and retreats. If this dog is going to kill me, I'm going to make sure it remembers me.

I lunge forward, striking the wounded head once more and it recoils. Another head snaps at me, and I smash my rock into its face. My arm is released, and I snatch it back. Long jagged teeth, foul breath, and gleaming red eyes fill my vision. My face is covered with a layer of saliva as the creature brandishes its massive teeth above me. Wide jaws grab my throat, and I jerk my head back. Narrowly missing the jagged rock beside me.

I beat the nearest head with my rock and manage to kick the beast off me. I roll to my feet and charge for my weapons. I scoop them up, and a heap of dirt crams up under my nails with my effort. I turn to face the beast, and its heads shake as if it can dislodge the damage, I had done to them. A cry draws my attention, and I turn to see a boy, a little younger than me sounding an alarm. I'm not the only one to notice. The cerebi turns its massive head. It makes the decision that the boy is an easier victim and charges.

"Run," I cry, but the boy doesn't heed my words.

I sprint towards him, aiming to intercept the cerebi and draw its attention from the boy. As I run, I notice a young woman and a large man appear from the cave entrance. There is no time to think about them. I reach the beast, and it is now so close to the boy that there is no time for grace. I leap and tackle the creature. My whole-body weight slamming into its side and sending a painful sprinkle of acid to fall across my arms and back. We roll through the dust, and my head strikes something hard. A burst of silver dots scatters through my vision, and I fight back the darkness that threatens to overwhelm me. The creature slumps on top of me, its massive weight crushing the air from my lungs. I twist uncomfortably and find my sword buried in its side, thick yellow blood oozing from the wound.

"Get it off her," commands a female voice.

Feet hurry towards me, and the creature is lifted off. I take in large grateful gasps of air.

The young woman kneels beside my head and takes my hand, looking at my injuries. "She needs treatment."

I feel the pull of darkness. My body trembles and I swallow the lump in my throat. The only way they will be able to identify me is my brand. I

don't want to die as a number. I look at the woman and feebly squeeze her hand.

“Claire, my name is Claire.”

She looks down at me, concern on her face.

I try again, as darkness spills into my vision. I force the words past my lips, “My name is Claire.”

Chapter Six

Intense throbbing pulses through my battered body, and I squint through slitted eyes, the light is so bright I ram them shut. I squirm and a searing pain bursts through my leg. An involuntary whimper escapes me as I roll over to see where I am, and why I'm not dead yet.

The lights are too bright, blurring my vision as I struggle to sit up. My aching muscles scream in protest. I finally reach my elbows when a massive hand shoves me back onto my pillow.

"Stay still," grunts a rough male voice.

I squint, trying to focus on the owner of the giant hand. Slowly my pounding head adjusts to the light in the room, and I can see the man in front of me. He still stands with his arm outstretched, ready to thwart any further attempts at getting up. He is so tall I have to hold my head at an awkward angle just to look up at his face.

His charcoal hair is cut close to his scalp, except for a thick strip about an inch long that runs down the center of his head. My gaze moves over his broad face, dark brown eyes and stubble covered jawline. A dark web tattoo covers one side of the man's neck, most of it trailing under his light green shirt. He is enormous, easily six foot tall, and so muscular he looks like he could walk through a stone wall and think nothing of it. I do not fail to notice the long broadsword that hangs from his hip. The whole image is of an intimidating man that knows he is powerful. A vague twinge of memory tugs at me.

Before I have a chance to delve into that thought, a woman enters the room carrying a woven basket loaded with items. A sword hangs at her hip, and she walks with a natural grace that demands attention.

The man removes his hand from my shoulder and stands to attention while eyeing the basket in the woman's arms.

The man points at me his face crushed into a sneer like I'm some sort of disgusting animal. "Surely you don't mean to use that on her?"

The woman crosses the room and stands before me. "Yes, I do," she replies calmly.

"She is an outsider and could be a spy. Even if she is not, blood loss or infection will kill her anyway, and that's only if she survives the toxins

from the acid first. If I were in charge I wouldn't waste precious resources on her," spits the man.

"You are not in charge." The woman replies curtly. "In any case she saved Oscar."

The man holds out his arm gesturing at me wildly, spit flying from his mouth. "She led the beast right to him!"

The woman sets the basket on the floor next to me and rises to her full height which is about the height of the huge man's shoulder. She places her hand on the hilt of her sword in a casual gesture. I don't doubt she knows how to use it. "We were both there. I recall her running towards the beast when she could have run away from it."

The man eyes the woman and the veins in his neck throb, but he seems to realize this is a fight he won't win. "Yes, Alexandra."

Alexandra's jaw clenches, and she turns her back to the man. "Go eat, Nathaniel, you must stay strong."

The dismissal is apparent in her voice.

The man nods and stomps towards a curtain. Before he reaches it, the woman adds, "Nathaniel, do not call me Alexandra. You know I hate it."

Nathaniel throws a final disapproving glance in my direction as he tosses the material aside and steps through the doorway. "Yes, I do."

He disappears from sight, and the woman releases a small sigh as she shakes her head slowly.

I am glad he is gone.

Alexandra kneels beside me and takes a wet cloth from the basket. She folds it and wipes the blood from my face.

Alexandra doesn't speak as she cleans my wounds, and while working her dark brown hair falls forward, gentle waves framing her face.

Gently she presses the fabric to the back of my head, and the pressure makes my eyes hurt and my world spin.

The cloth withdraws and I eye the sticky blood coating it. The woman looks at the fabric and then leans over to scrutinize the head wound more closely. "This will need stitches."

She leans back as if to assess my response. Vibrant green eyes search mine. I'm pretty sure I have never seen that color green before, and I stare for far too long lost in the emerald depths.

The woman's eyebrows knit together. "Claire, your head wound needs stitches."

She remembers my name. A smile creeps onto my face, and the woman looks at me her eyebrows furrowed. My response probably makes me look like my head wound has sent me loopy.

Alexandra tries again, "Claire?"

I wet my lips, and try to speak, but all that comes out is a croak. The woman turns to her basket, searches through it, and pulls out a water skin. Patiently she holds it to my lips while I drink. The water soothes my dry throat leaving a cool trail all the way to my chest.

I clear my throat, and the crackle leaves my voice, "Okay."

A tanned hand presses against my forehead. "You're warm. The acid you have in your leg is nasty, and you are in for a rough few days as it works through your system."

I nod and try not to think about the way my eyes focus on her lips as she speaks.

She pulls another smaller water skin out of her basket. "You must drink this three times a day to help your body fight the acid. It can get nasty if it is not treated properly." She pours a small measure of purple liquid into a tiny metal cup and holds it out to me.

I squint at the woman and my head pounds in sync with my heartbeat. "Who are you?"

She eyes me and I sit up taking the cup from her tanned hand. I sniff the liquid, it is strangely odorless. I down it in one go and it burns the whole way down. I let out a small cough and hastily put the cup down on the bed beside me in case she decides I need another dose of the foul liquid.

The woman removes her hand and collects a needle and thread. "You can call me Lexa."

"Hello Lexa," I say and hold out my hand.

She smiles and clasps my forearm. "Hello Claire."

Lexa rises to her feet and climbs on to the bed behind me. She settles with her knees pressed against the small of my back and I shuffle uncomfortably.

"How is the boy?" I ask.

Lexa parts my hair around the wound gently. "Oscar is well, although he may not thank me for all the survival drills, I am about to put him through."

My lips curl at her remark. "It is probably for the best. He was frozen to the spot."

"Yes, and of little help to you. If Oscar is going to patrol the caves he needs to learn to respond in frightening situations."

The back of my head burns as the needle is forced through the tender skin. I am lucky Lexa is quick.

Within minutes she is back in my vision, and she rummages through the basket and holds out some kind of yellow-green moss. "Chew."

I take the moss in my hand. "What is it?"

Lexa moves to my arm and wipes around the bracer, trying to get a look at the injury without aggravating it further. "It will taste awful, and make you feel tired, but it will help with the pain."

I look at the twisted lump of moss and crinkle my nose at the moist spongy chunk in my hand. Who was the insane person who first decided to put this lumpy wet thing in their mouth? I can honestly say, I never would have thought to eat it.

I hesitate but Lexa watches me intently and I have no choice. I lift the moss to my mouth and bite down. The grainy texture spreads over my tongue and gets caught between my teeth. Bitter liquid follows the grains, sweeping through my mouth and sticking everywhere it pleases. Almost like its very goal is to make whoever dares to eat it as uncomfortable as possible.

Lexa gives me a small smile. "I told you it was awful."

She holds out the water canteen, and I take a grateful gulp doing my best to rinse my mouth with the liquid.

Lexa peels off my sticky bracer and inspects the wounds there. "So how did you end up surrounded by three dead scarlet guards and a cerebi?"

I let out a wry smile. "I was taking a stroll."

Lexa eyes me. "You were taking a stroll?"

"Yes, as fast as I could away from the compound."

Lexa smirks. "And those guards, they took a stroll with you?"

I sigh. "No. They caught up with me, and they weren't all that happy about my late-night walk."

"I can't imagine they were. You fought well. Outnumbered as you were, I am impressed you took out three guards and a cerebi in the time it took for us to respond to Oscar's alarm."

I look at Lexa and fidget with the hem of the blanket draped across my lap. "More will come."

The dark-haired woman half shrugs. "My experience with these matters has shown a constant trend. The guards tend not to care about people who escape after the first day or two."

I look at her and can't make myself believe her words. Katherine's comment about my lineage and my mother being detained rather than executed makes me think it won't be easy. For some reason, Emperor Darkmor wants my mother and me.

"I don't think this time will be the same," I mutter inspecting the dirt under my fingernails with displeasure.

Emerald green eyes look up from their work. "What makes you say that?"

I shift uncomfortably. I like Lexa, I cannot deny there is a certain connection, but certain information in the hands of the wrong people could be very dangerous for me. Emperor has offered handsome rewards for things he has wanted to acquire in the past. I don't really want to become his newest acquisition.

"I am a prime gladiator," I say.

Lexa looks at me intently before sighing and putting the needle away, and I realize with a jolt she has sutured my arm, and that I hadn't even been aware. I glance back at the twisted lump of moss in my hand and cram the rest in my mouth.

She shifts, so we are facing one another. "Their bodies have been moved and buried far from here. No one will find us."

I nod and search for a way to thank the woman in front of me. Words seem oddly insufficient. Instead, I let out a huge yawn. Wow, that moss works fast.

Lexa watches my struggle, and a small smile grows on her face. "You are safe here with the rebels, and you are protected. Now get some rest."

I blink at the woman. Did she intend for resting to sound like an order? She places a hand on my shoulder and gently guides me back onto the bed. The blanket is so warm and the bed so inviting that sleep overcomes me.

I fade in and out of consciousness, waking long enough to sip water and drink a few mouthfuls of the purple liquid. Always I awake to a

different person. A part of me registers I haven't seen Lexa since our initial encounter, and I feel a tickle of disappointment.

I don't know how long I spend fading in and out of consciousness, but I suspect the drink they are having me take at each waking is the primary cause.

When I wake up this time, I am much better. I cannot ever remember feeling so rested. It is amazing to think I had to flee in the dark of night and almost get mauled to death before I could get such a rest.

Groggily I sit up, and brief pain bursts through my leg. Moving aside the blanket I discover my armor has been removed, and I'm only wearing my shorts and a tank top.

My cheeks heat as my mind wonders without my permission if it was Lexa who had removed my clothes.

I shake my head. "You are walking a dangerous path here Claire," I mutter to myself, and I inspect the wounds I collected during my escape from the compound.

The cut on my calf has healed well, and the stitches in it look ready to come out. My right thigh is covered in a purple moss and held in place with a tight linen bandage. I am covered in an array of small, scabbed scratches from the compound fence. To be honest, these aren't the worst injuries I have ever had.

I sit up and peer at the rugged walls surrounding me and note the uneven scrapes and rounded corners. I touch the rough wall, and a tiny amount of dirt comes loose under the pressure of my hand, the little grains falling to the ground without a sound. The room is lit by small glowing crystals pushed into the walls around the space. I inspect the closest crystal, which is about the size of my fist and emits a dim light. I don't see any wires or cables of any kind. I've never seen anything like this. How are they powered? It doesn't look like the kind of electric lights they have in the infirmary at the compound.

I turn my attention from the wall to find my leather armor on a stone table near the bed and my bag on the floor beside it. I cannot see my weapons. Which to be honest isn't surprising.

I drop my legs over the side of the bed and get up, groaning as I move. I flex my tight legs, and it takes a few minutes to work a little flexibility into them. Lying in a bed after a long run through a cold cavern is never a good idea. I should have made an effort to stretch.

I limp over to my armor and pick it up. I turn the familiar leather in my hands. My bracer and pants have been cleaned and mended with patches of dark brown leather. I pull them on, thankful to whoever had repaired them. I pick up my vest and pause, the fastenings on my vest have changed from round stones to large canine teeth. I stare at the jacket, trying to figure out where they had come from. I get a flashback of teeth snapping close to my face and am reminded of foul breath. I look back at the fastenings and find new meaning there.

“We found them in your bracer,” comes a voice from the doorway. “It would seem the cerebi left you a present.”

I look up from the vest and find the source of the voice. A woman leaning in the doorway, her arms crossed and a smile playing on her lips.

“Lexa,” I greet my heart completing a strange leap in my chest. I shift awkwardly and hold up my armor. “Do you know who repaired these? I would like to thank them.”

Lexa nods. “It was Tash who restored your armor. I will take you to her. But first, you must eat, and then perhaps bathe.”

My stomach rumbles loudly in response to Lexa's comment, almost as if it is trying to prove her point. Sighing at my body's betrayal, I nod, and finish strapping my armor to my body and walk over to Lexa. She leads me out the door, and I berate myself for not thanking her.

“Lexa,” I say, surprising myself.

Lexa stops in a busy hall and patiently waits for me to speak.

“I—what you did—thank you,” I finish lamely. Well, I suppose it's better than nothing.

Lexa nods. “No need to mention it, I am sure if our places were reversed you would have offered me the same courtesy.”

I agree with her words, but at the same time, knowing what I would have done doesn't seem like enough.

I follow her through the labyrinth of underground corridors. The curved roofs are a style I have never encountered before, and the many rooms house small groups of people. The space they share looks bigger than the cell I grew up in. Each entryway is graced with a curtain of a woven plant of some kind, which can be pulled across to grant its occupants a measure of privacy. Gems like the ones I had seen earlier are pushed into the walls and light the corridor. How did they build a place

like this without Emperor Darkmor realizing? Surely the dirt from the digging must go somewhere.

I look at the woman beside me. "Lexa, why do the crystals glow?"

Lexa raises an eyebrow and gives me a sidelong glance. "They are a special type of crystal, our ancestors were said to possess magical abilities. Some of them could place a portion of their magic into crystals."

I know magic is real I had not seen Emperor Darkmor wield it? And my own mother had told me stories of people with magical abilities. But how could something as ordinary as a gem hold power?

I fiddle with a tooth on my vest. "Our ancestors put their powers into crystals?"

Lexa looks at me and seems to decide I legitimately don't know the answer. "Yes, many songs are sung of it, but they all come with a caution. For there was a man who once poured his magic into crystals and used them to corrupt people's minds in his quest to control them."

"They don't sound like pleasant tales."

Lexa turns another corner. "All types of power are easily corrupted. Unpleasant tales are better than reliving the past."

I can find no argument with her words and return to watching the people around us interact. People come and leave as they please, and the general atmosphere is of happiness and purpose. These people are different from the ones I grew up with in my cell.

A small blonde girl runs up to a woman with curly red hair. "Mummy!"

The woman scoops her up and swings her in a circle. The small girl laughs with delight and wriggles her legs happily. Her smile is one of pure joy as she carries her daughter back into a room where a smiling blonde woman greets them with a hug, and a tender kiss. Together they walk into the room.

I can't help but notice other families and couples walking together in the hall. Of course, we had families and couples in our cells. There is very little privacy, and it is difficult to be completely unaware of people coupling. Many children are born, and women are often given leave to nurse them. After all, how would the empire get more slaves if it didn't allow us to reproduce? But these people haven't given up hope of living, they are genuinely happy.

The sounds of the happy family fade as we make our way towards a large entryway. The scent of a well-cooked meal fills my senses. Lexa leads me in and reveals a room far more extensive than the one I awoke in. This room holds many long tables and benches. I inspect the closest one and find it's made of hardened mud. So are the seats around it. The cooking stove, the serving table, everything is made from packed and hardened soil.

Well, that explains what they did with some of the dirt they dug out of the tunnels.

The people nearest to us eat from trays of food, speaking merrily to their neighbors. It is evident from the dirt on their skin and clothes that some of them have labor-intensive jobs, but still, they laugh and chat with the people beside them. Lexa leads me to a line on the room's far side where people are handing out food trays. A smile spreads across my face, and pace by pace we work our way up the line and receive plates of our own.

People nod and show great respect to Lexa as she passes. Many cast curious lingering gazes at me as I follow behind her. Their looks don't bother me for too long as my attention is drawn to the tray in my hands. A slice of hot bread, a thick stew, and a hunk of cheese fills the plate, making my stomach rumble.

I have never seen so much food all at once, and hot food is so rare I can count on my fingers the amount of times I have had it. My stomach rumbles at the delightful scent, and I struggle not to eat from my tray before I even sit.

"Lexa, where am I?" I ask almost overwhelmed by all the freedom and luxury around me.

Lexa pauses for a moment as she considers her answer. "A place where you are safe. A place where there is still hope."

I accept her answer as one for someone she is not sure she can trust. We weave our way through the seated people and reach a table, where I happily flop onto a bench. The people around us greet Lexa and spare a glance at me before they return to their meals and conversations.

I attack my food with vigor, my spoon making quick trips to my mouth before returning to my bowl to collect another load. It had been a long few days, and I hadn't eaten anything since before my last gladiator

match. Even then it had been a small slice of stale bread, a lump of cold unidentifiable meat and water.

Within minutes I have eaten my entire meal, and I'm using the last of my bread to scrape my plate clean. I inspect the bowl closely, ensuring I have not missed any morsels. It is so clean, it looks like food has never rested upon it.

Silence draws my attention from my squeaky-clean bowl, and I look up to find the entire table staring at me with their mouths open.

My cheeks turn red as heat spreads through them. I stare silently at my empty tray, trying to avoid the faces of the people around me. My stomach rumbles louder than before in a desperate attempt to embarrass me further. A few people chuckle in response. Groaning I lean forward, putting my face in my hands. I have survived the cerebi just to die from humiliation.

A movement from nearby catches my attention, and a nearly full tray slides into view. I pull my face from my hands to see Lexa's hand retreating from the dish now in front of me.

"Eat," Lexa commands.

The whole table is totally silent, watching our interaction.

I look at Lexa's green eyes. I'm sure refusal will be seen as rude. Plus, I really want it. "Are you sure?"

Lexa nods and pushes the tray closer. "You are hungry and healing."

"Thank you."

Lexa nods once more, and I pick up my spoon, forcing myself to eat at a more respectable pace than before.

The atmosphere around the table relaxes as everyone returns to their food and talks to their neighbors, occasionally sending a glance my way. Probably to make sure I haven't eaten the metal trays too.

After I have finished my second helping, Lexa leads me back into the labyrinth of corridors. "The bathrooms are near the room you were treated in. We are lucky there is a natural spring there, and the water flows freely. It is clean but cool. If you wish for a hot bath, there are tubs, but you must haul and heat your own water."

That seems fair. Lexa leads me into the room, and I see the promised spring. There are four baths made from well fitted stone bricks and some kind of adhesive. The tubs are surprisingly well put together and even look comfortable. Considering the stone walls that had made my cell this is a

work of exceptional skill and talent. All the baths have some sort of privacy curtain, made of what I suspect is a skin of some kind. At the back of the room, in a hearth, sits an orange crystal with smooth glossy edges.

Lexa steps into the room beside me and gestures at the hip high gem. “We don’t have the resources to use wood for fire, as we have few ways of acquiring it. This is another one of those crystals I told you about. It produces heat. Take care not to touch it. It will burn you.”

“Do you have many of these crystals?” I ask.

Lexa nods. “We are fortunate enough to have elders here that remember the old ways, some of them have the gift to imbue the crystals themselves, but we discourage it as it comes with a cost to their health. Others we have recovered.”

I make my way to the spring and Lexa helps me to collect water in buckets. “You mean people here can do magic?”

“Not everybody has the gift and the people who do have a weakened form. From the stories I have heard the gift was once quite powerful.”

Lexa speaks of gifted people as if they appear regularly. “Why have I never met someone gifted?”

Lexa looks at me. “If you had control over thousands of beings, and that control came from your twisted use of the gift, would you allow it to grow in others?”

It takes me a moment to comprehend her words. “Emperor Darkmor kills them.”

“Yes. The gifted either hide their secret well, or they die.”

I haul two buckets to the gem and place them beside it. I am surprised by its warmth. Even with Lexa's explanation, I am still bewildered that a crystal can give off heat. I hold my hands out in front of it and warm them. I don’t get too close, from this distance I can feel the intense heat and the danger that comes with it. “Do you have to do anything to it to keep it hot?”

Lexa drops two other buckets beside the gem. “No. Once a crystal is imbued with magic it will serve the intended purpose until it is destroyed.”

I return to the pool and haul a few buckets of cold water over to the tub. “How do you know so much?”

Lexa takes buckets over to her own tub. “Our recovery efforts are not just limited to crystals.”

I wait, but she offers nothing further. Curiosity burns inside me, but I know she has already answered a lot of my questions, and I am aware of how little I have given in return.

“Is there anything you wish to know from me?”

Lexa pauses and ponders the question. “How did you escape?”

“I told the guards I wanted to train. I tricked my guard into leaving me unattended and escaped through a small hole in the fence. I was spotted by a guard on patrol and pursued. The rest you know.”

Lexa is quick to fire another question. “What prompted you to leave?”

I want to say the treatment, but that had been happening every day since I was captured, and I had never tried to escape before now. I look away from her, and at the floor, my mouth pulls into a tight line.

I resolve that a portion of truth is the best course of action. I do my best to keep my voice from wavering, “My mother went for a review and didn’t come back.”

Lexa pauses and gives me a look of genuine remorse. “I’m sorry, Claire.”

I nod but keep my silence, the pain of losing my mother and the torment she must be going through prickles at my eyes. I am worried my voice will betray me.

Lexa clears her throat and points to a bench. “You will find soaps over there. We make what we can from meat fats and plants that grow around here.”

I make my way over to the soaps and a group of women enter the room, chatting as they herd in a group of young children.

I turn my attention to the soap, there are two bowls of waxy flakes to choose from, one purple, and one green. I sniff the container of green soap, and an overbearing floral scent floods my nose. I sneeze and quickly put it back on the bench. I reach for the purple flakes and take a smaller more hesitant sniff. The scent of this one is less overpowering more earthy, certainly better. I look around, unsure of how much I am supposed to use.

Lexa comes over, takes a small handful of purple flakes, and sprinkles it into the water. I look back at the bowl of purple flakes and repeat Lexa’s actions. I collect my buckets from the hearth and lug them over to the bath.

I pour the steaming water into the tub and mix in buckets of cold water until I find a pleasant temperature. I pull the screen shut and carefully pull my armor and clothes off. I cannot help but notice the state of my poor battered body as I stand in only my undergarments and the bandage on my leg and arm. The bruising on my chest from my battle in the arena has turned into black and purple blotches.

I consider the water and my bandages. Am I supposed to take them off first? I fumble with the bandage on my leg looking for the place where it is tied off.

A throat clears on the other side of the privacy curtain. "Claire? Would you like help with your bandages?" Lexa asks. "Clean dressings are being brought in for after your bath."

My fingers struggle with the tight knot holding the bandage in place and I let out a slow controlled breath. "Yes," I reply fighting to keep the frustration from my voice. "Please." I add.

Lexa slides in through the opening in the curtain, a pile of neatly folded clothes in her hands and seems surprised to see me already undressed. She quickly looks away and sets her jaw. I can see the muscles working from here.

"Apologies, I did not realize you had taken your shorts and shirt off," Lexa says as she stares resolutely at the curtain.

I look down at myself. I hadn't even considered that my state of undress would make people uncomfortable. I had shared a cell with at least a dozen people my whole life. There is no measure of privacy in those kinds of conditions.

"Sorry," I stammer stooping to collect the shirt I had unceremoniously dumped on the ground. "I can get dressed."

Lexa squares her shoulders and shakes her head softly. "No. It is okay." With that she walks over and begins removing the bandage from my arm.

We stand in silence while Lexa works. Finally, my arm is free and looks like it is healing well. Six separate stitches hold together deep puncture wounds, it will be an interesting scar.

"I believe we can leave this uncovered if you are careful to keep it clean," Lexa remarks placing the soiled linen bandage in a small basket I hadn't noticed earlier and the moss padding in a pile beside it.

Then she gets to her knees in front of me and begins working on the bandage covering my right thigh. I shift. I should have put my shorts back on, this is more awkward than I had realized it would be.

It certainly doesn't help that she is an exceedingly beautiful woman. I stare at the curtain and listen to the women teaching the children to swim in the pool on the other side. Trying desperately not to think about the soft hands touching my thigh.

Finally, it is over, and I step away and inspect my wound in a way I hope isn't awkward. Well, any more awkward than I have already made this whole situation. It was stupid to have not put my clothes back on.

Lexa rises to her feet. "Your burn will sting in the water. But it will be good for it." With that she turns and leaves, ensuring the curtain is closed tight behind her.

I close my eyes and take a slow breath. Well, that could have been less awkward.

I remove the necklace from the makeshift pocket in my shorts and drape it around my neck for safe keeping. I pull off my undergarments and stand at the edge of the steaming water. Hesitantly I lift my leg into the bath. The warmth of the water almost stings, and I grit my teeth and force myself into the tub. After a few moments my tense muscles relax, and I take a deep breath as I conclude that I may be a fan of hot baths. Having never had one before, the sensation is completely new, but not at all unpleasant.

I eye a strip of linen cloth draped over the small stone bench next to the bath and I happily scrub myself clean with it. I hold my hand out to the light and marvel at how bright my skin has become. It is strange to see it without any trace of dirt or grime, it seems weirdly pale. I lean back in the tub with a sigh. The steam rises around me in great billows, twisting and dancing in the breeze.

My mother would have loved this. The thought comes unbidden, and I bite my lip to quiet a sob that threatens to break free at the thought of my mother. What are they doing to her? I let out a soft sob, and the prickle of tears finally flow free.

The bath water has cooled when I finally climb out. A cloth is thrown over my privacy screen. "Dry yourself with this," Lexa says in a quiet voice.

I take the cloth and use it to dry myself before I quickly dress using the pants and shirt from the pile Lexa had brought in with her. I ensure my necklace is tucked under my armor and hidden from sight before I draw back the privacy screen. Lexa is sitting with her feet dipped into the spring, quietly chatting with a group of women. I look back at my bath water and am appalled at how dark it is. Had I truly been carrying around all that? I look at the filthy tub water—where I am supposed to empty it? I walk around the tub inspecting it, and my foot slips into a divot. This channel runs under each of the bathtubs and out through a hole in the wall. I pull a plug made of some kind of spongey material from the base of the bath and watch as the water splashes out into the channel and out through the hole.

I return my buckets to the pile ready to be used again and fold my filthy tattered clothes. I debate what to do with the drying cloth when I spot Lexa washing hers in the bubbling spring. I take mine over and do my best to mimic Lexa's actions, and when she rises to hang hers on a line, I follow her.

Lexa corrects the way I hang my cloth. “How was your bath?”

I get the feeling there is a hidden meaning in her question. “I feel better after it.”

She nods to me and bids farewell to the women. “I will take you to the room that has been assigned to you.”

I follow her out the corridor, and we walk in silence. We turn down a familiar hall and a long droning sound screams in the air around us. Not a minute passes before another siren joins it, and they screech their awful song together. I look around, searching for the source of the sound as it echoes throughout the hall. The rise and fall of the sirens brings everyone to a standstill.

People around me respond to the siren before I can even figure out where it is coming from. Individuals group up and hurry down the hall. Many draw weapons, others shout orders, and within a few seconds, a line of people quietly hasten down the corridor.

Their actions are well practiced. Surely Lexa must know what is happening. I look at the woman next to me, glancing over her stiff posture and rigid muscles. A sinking sensation heavy in the pit of my stomach.

Something tells me, this is not a drill.

Chapter Seven

Lexa freezes, takes hold of my arm and drags me back into the rooms we just passed. I cast a quick look around and recognize the bed and the table. It is the room I recovered in.

“There has been a security breach.” Lexa says as she draws her sword from the sheath on her back and stands in a battle-ready stance. “Grab your gear.”

The whole movement is so smooth and elegant I can’t help but stare in awe. I’m sure if I tried to do that, I would cut off my ear. I have never pulled a weapon from a sheath before, all my weapons had always been handed to me bare. After a moment of appreciation, I remember I’m supposed to be collecting my gear. I rush over to my pack, stuff everything in it, and glance around the room. I wish I had my weapons, but it can’t be helped.

Lexa throws me silent glances, urging me to hurry. I fling my backpack across my shoulders and rush over to her. She raises her finger to her lips, and I quiet my breathing and movements. Lexa peers down the hall. Every one of her actions has a purpose, and I doubt she is the type to waste energy on something she doesn’t believe is a genuine threat.

Weariness seeps through me as the poison acid from the cerebi reminds me why I was bed ridden for so many days. I shake my head to clear the fog settling there.

Lexa steps out the doorway and runs down the empty corridor. I follow close on her heels. We run past dozens of rooms, and I peer into them as we sprint by. They are all empty. Half-finished tasks left where owners left them in their hasty departure. I catch glimpses of steaming mugs and dropped items, ownerless toys. Dread builds in the pit of my stomach, and I don’t even know what I’m running from.

We approach an intersection, and Lexa stops so suddenly I catapult right into the back of her. Receiving a face full of curly brown hair, I stumble over my own feet and windmill my arms around trying to regain my balance. Lexa’s hand darts out, grabs a fistful of my shirt, and stops me from falling on my backside. I scrabble to regain my footing while Lexa effortlessly holds me up. It’s like holding a grown woman with one arm is a task she does on a regular basis.

My cheeks grow hot. I stare at my shirt fisted in Lexa's hand as she holds me still. I glance up to see her tilted head and quiet, measured breaths.

I get the hint and breathe as quietly as I can. The floor beneath us rumbles, shaking as something very big gets closer. The pounding of footsteps becomes clearer, mixing in with the earth-shaking thumps. A tall man, a dark-haired woman and two children round the corner and almost run into us.

The man is wild eyed as he pushes the children in front of him. "It is coming. Run!"

He turns and looks down the hall seeing something we can't. His face pales and he pushes the woman away from him, she stumbles forward landing on her knees as a huge beast barrels into the man roughly throwing him into the wall.

He hits it with a sickening crunch and falls to the ground limp. The woman screams and I clamp a hand around her mouth cutting the sound short. The creature's ears twitch, but it is very focused on the man crumpled on the ground in front of it.

Lexa and I round up the women and children and push them into a small room nearby.

The dark-haired woman pleads with Lexa her tear-streaked cheeks reddening with distress. "Please, we have to go back and get Adran."

"First we must get you and the children back to safety," Lexa says calmly.

The young girl who cannot be older than six reaches up and grabs the woman's hand. "Mummy, I'm scared."

The boy beside her looks to be the same age and has tears streaming down his face. That's when I realize they are twins.

"Is Da coming back? The boy asks in a small voice, and my heart breaks a little.

The woman seems to come to herself and crouches to hold the children in a tight embrace.

I creep to the door and peer around the corner, the beast has it's back to us. It is almost in front of the doorway and wet rips of tearing flesh travel to my ears and sincerely make me doubt I want a close look at what is happening to Adran.

Lexa leans around the corner beside me as the creature lets out a bellow that shakes the ground around my feet. An answering cry is heard in the distance and the two rumble together for a time. The creature returns its scaled bronze head to its victim, and its long turquoise crest of spikes scrape the wall as it angles its head into a more efficient position. One of the horns is jagged and half the size of the others surrounding it. What could have snapped something that thick?

We lean back and glance at one another. We have no hope of outrunning the beast. It is massive, and with the help of well-muscled legs, the creature will easily catch us if we try to run. How did something that big get inside the tunnels? It barely fits in the hallway, I don't see it crawling into such a small space out of curiosity.

I glance back at the small family. "We could try to wait the beast out," I suggest.

Lexa shakes her head. "That is a chimera, those horns are designed for digging and its appetite is insatiable." She lowers her voice, "Once it is done, it will find us."

"I doubt we can outrun it. Especially with the children," I muse. I glance at Lexa. "If you give me one of your swords, I will distract it."

Lexa purses her lips. "It will likely kill you."

I eye the creature. "Perhaps not, I have fought creatures in the arena before, creatures specially bred for their relentless ferocity. At the very least I will survive long enough for everyone to get away."

With a deep breath, Lexa nods and draws a second sword from the sheath on her back. Two swords, that's an unusual specialty. She offers the sword to me, and I take it and move it around experimentally. It is light and well balanced.

She turns to face the family. "Get ready to run. Do not look back."

The woman nods and gathers her children, taking one of their hands in each of hers.

Lexa draws her second sword and I raise an eyebrow. She smirks. "You are not the only one who has fought beasts in the arena."

I cannot help but feel a strange sense of excitement at this declaration. I peer around the doorway and eye the bronze creature its many large scales glinting in the light of the crystals. To slay it would require finding a way through the glinting armor of scales that cover the beast's entire body. That isn't going to be easy.

Lexa rolls her shoulders. “It is best we kill it. We cannot let it get to the evacuation points. It could do serious damage.”

I have to agree, and at the rate it is devouring its current victim it won’t be distracted for too much longer.

We bring the family to the door, and I do my best to keep myself between them and the creature. They don’t need to see what is happening.

“Ready?” Lexa asks, everyone nods. “Now!” She yells and together we charge forward, weapons ready. The small family runs down the hall as the beast raises its massive head and stares at us as if we are the intruders. Six golden heads snake out from the main face like tentacles with viciously toothed mouths.

It lets out a low rumble. The tiny heads stop devouring the poor father on the floor and gape at us. Bits of flesh still hang from their jaws, as small yellow eyes assess the threat.

Adran lays on the floor, his blue eyes stare lifelessly– accusingly towards us, his body a mangled mess.

The giant animal lets out a bellow and charges towards us. The hallway is narrow, and the beast takes up most of the room. Its horns scrape the dirt walls with each bound the creature makes.

I rush forward and slide under the creature, trying to pierce through the scales on its stomach. To my surprise, my sword creates a series of sparks that ignite along the scales as I slide past.

The creature charges over me, kicking up dust as it goes. Ignoring me like I’m not even there. I roll in the dirt in time to see Lexa jump onto the beast’s head. She lifts her sword and drops her body with it, attempting to bury her blade in the creature’s head. But her sword just bounces harmlessly off the scales with a loud clang.

Unlike me, though, the beast notices Lexa and shakes its head from side to side to trying dislodge its unwelcome rider. Lexa loses her sword when she is tossed around and scrabbles to her feet, crouching low as she holds onto the beast’s horns as it attempts to displace her. It pushes her dangerously close to the ceiling and she is forced to almost lay flat along

the monster's head. Thick horns dig into the solid dirt walls tearing the corridor apart. Chunks of earth rain on us and dust creates a cloud that is hard to breathe in.

The smaller heads join in the fight, snapping at her legs and ankles. Lexa drops into a crouch and is forced to remove a hand from the stabilizing horns and draw the dagger at her hip so she can fight the tiny heads.

Lexa can't keep this up for long. I charge towards the beast, throwing myself under its body and wriggling forward doing my best to avoid the stamping feet and flying chunks of dirt. I push myself out and stop below the creature's head.

This time it notices me. Its black eyes turn to ogle me, and it stops shaking its head to focus on me, trying to figure out where I had come from.

A tiny severed head lands in the dirt near my head with a sickening thud, its lifeless yellow eyes staring at me. Its bloodied mouth gapes open in a silent scream. The severed stump reveals softer scales across the mutilated appendage, almost as if they are new and hadn't had a chance to harden yet.

The giant beast lets out a mighty bellow, and I scramble to get out from under it. It shakes its head, thrashing from side to side, tearing holes in the walls with its crest. The thrashing frees Lexa's grip, and she slips and is pinned to the wall in between two massive horns. The broken horn I noticed earlier pokes dangerously close to Lexa's sternum. Its' wickedly jagged edge inching closer and closer. Her feet scrabble for purchase against the beast's head, and she pushes herself as far away from the spike as the wall will allow her.

I grab a fist full of dirt and throw it into the beast's eyes. It bellows, and I have a front row seat to the inside of the massive mouth lined with fist-sized teeth. I thrust the sword upwards with all my strength piercing its soft pallet. My sword sinks to the hilt in the beast's brain, and I twist the blade ensuring its end is quick.

I stare at my arm surrounded by jagged teeth and try not to think about what would happen if the giant mouth closed.

I pull the sword from the beast and step back as the creature crumples. Lexa is still trapped within the massive horns that are embedded in the wall around her. The way the monster is going down is causing deep

cracks to spread along the wall like a web. I watch in horror as the wall breaks into chunks and cracks sprawl across the roof. They spread faster than water rushing down a smooth hill. The beast is going down, and it's going to take the wall and Lexa with it. She struggles, with the horns and does her best to twist out of them, but nothing works.

My eyes meet Lexa's. "Run," she shouts as she tries to wriggle free of her prison.

Huge chunks fall from the ceiling around us, landing with a resounding boom, and the floor shudders with each impact.

I shake my head and climb the beast's head, dodging falling rocks until I reach Lexa. Gripping the horns and bracing my feet on the wall I push with all my strength tugging on the massive beast's head. I growl in frustration. I don't have the strength for this. My eyes dart to the broken horn nestled between the two pinning Lexa to the rock. The spike slowly inches closer Lexa's chest as the rock behind her starts to break free.

I leap onto the beast's head and hack at the horns, trying to cut through the one near Lexa's chest. If I remove it, then maybe Lexa can wriggle free. I cut halfway through, and my sword gets wedged in the horn. I tug, but it's stuck fast. Desperately I kick at the horn, and it starts to give. One last vicious kick snaps the horn in two. Lexa wriggles free from her trap as the roof loses its battle with gravity. She takes hold of my waist and jumps off the beast's head, narrowly missing a massive chunk of roof as it falls where we stood moments before.

We turn in mid-air and land heavily on the ground. Lexa rolls on top of me straddling my hips and attempts to shield me from the falling rocks. A large rock strikes her shoulder with a noise that makes me cringe as if I were the one who took the hit. A gasp escapes Lexa, and her mouth sets in a hard line as the force of the impact pushes her towards me.

Our bodies meet, her cheek brushes mine, and a rush of energy flows through me. A bright blue light emanates from under my armor. We stare at the light in confusion, and I reach into my top and pull out my mother's necklace. Blue light flows from the necklace and spreads over our bodies. The falling rocks bounce off the light and land harmlessly on the ground around us. The shimmering around us isn't stable. It flickers, and small stones fall in through the gaps forming in the light.

A green light pours from Lexa's top, and she reaches into it and pulls out a necklace like mine. Instead of blue, hers is deep emerald, green. I

don't miss the fact it is the same color as her eyes. Lexa inches our glittering gems closer and takes hold of my hand. The light that explodes from the jeweled necklaces is blindingly white. I close my eyes and turn away, but the light pierces my closed eyelids creating an explosion of color. The light dulls, and I open my eyes to see a dancing wall of green and blue light.

A deafening boom resounds through the chaos of falling rocks, and a massive section of roof drops down and hits the light above us. It sits there for a moment, and I stare at it in disbelief. The chunk of rock is bigger and thicker than I am. After a moment it slowly slides off the light to land beside us with a crash that vibrates the ground. A cloud of dust rises, making it impossible to see anything but the shimmering light and the darkness that attempts to swallow it.

"We need to move," I shout over the noise of destruction around us.

Lexa glances down at our hands, her face reflecting my thoughts. How are we going to move without breaking the connection between our necklaces?

"Hold on to me and keep the necklaces together," Lexa orders and scoops me up in her arms.

The movement surprises me, and I fumble with the necklaces for a moment, causing our light to flicker for a heartbeat. I throw my arm around Lexa's neck and hold the necklaces together with my hand. Lexa runs, dodging fallen rocks as she sprints out of the corridor that could have easily become our tomb. After a few minutes, the roofing stabilizes, and Lexa slows her run. Coming to a stop, she lowers me to the ground, and for a moment we stand close. Lexa clears her throat and steps back, breaking our contact, and the light wall around us shimmers and fades.

Shouting fills the darkness, and a flickering light creeps into the hall not too far from where we stand. I shove my necklace under my vest.

"Lexa!" Shouts a female voice as the flaming torches cast their lights on us.

This voice belongs to a short blonde woman wearing a lot of belts. Seriously, every available space is filled with various objects. I can't help but think whatever this woman is doing she is certainly ready for it.

"Tash," Lexa greets with a warm smile and takes the short woman's forearm in her grip.

Tash glances over our battered appearances. "What happened?"

“A chimera caused a cave in.” Lexa replies. “Organize a team to stabilize the roof as soon as possible. We do not need it to spread.”

Tash runs her hands through her short hair. “Should we not first send a team to kill the chimera?”

Lexa shakes her head. “No need. Claire killed it.”

Tash seems to notice me for the first time. She raises her eyebrows. “Impressive.”

She turns back to Lexa and begins reporting to her. I look over this new woman as she fills Lexa in on what happened during our absence. A brand sits across the woman’s right cheek, ‘3871’ with the symbol of a spanner under it.

This woman had once been a slave too. An engineer if I’m correct. It is hard to be sure, as most engineers lived closer to Emperor Darkmor’s free citizens in order to maintain their machines day and night. Lexa rattles off a few commands and people around her hurry off to do her bidding.

“As it seems we are now safe, I believe introductions are necessary.” Lexa stands between myself and Tash. “Tash, this is Claire. Claire this is Tash.”

I step forward and grasp Tash’s arm. “Thanks for fixing my armor.” I say and gesture to it noticing a tear through the leather near my shoulder for the first time. “I’m afraid I may have already ruined all your hard work.”

“Maybe next time I should make you fix it,” Tash says with a smile. “Then perhaps it will last more than a few hours.”

I consider her suggestion. “I don’t know if it would help. I seem to have developed an awful habit of ending up in life-or-death situations.”

Tash removes a water canteen from one of her many belts and hands it to me. “Sounds unhealthy. Have you tried giving it up?”

I take the canteen and reply, “Yeah, but I seem to relapse back into old habits. Then before I know it, I end up scared to death and having to fight to save my skin all over again.”

Tash smiles and turns to Lexa. “I like this one, can we keep her?”

Lexa gives us a small smile that transforms her face. “I don’t know, she eats a lot.”

“And I snore,” I add.

“Yeah, and I suppose she does have that awful life or death habit,” Tash concludes. Lexa nods, her face solemn, and Tash snorts in laughter.

Nathanial jogs into view, a group of people with him. He approaches Lexa and reports, “There has been a tunnel collapse in the east wing and two chimeras have been spotted, one in the north wing and another in the west.”

Lexa nods. “The beast in the north wing is dead.”

Nathanial pauses for a long moment before grunting. “Good.”

“How did they get in here?” Lexa asks. “None of our entrances are big enough for creatures like that to just walk in.”

Nathanial stands a little taller. “The west side entrance has been blown apart.”

Lexa rubs her head. “Chimeras are not capable of using explosives.”

“The dead guards we found near the entrance are.” Nathanial adds. “The fools believed they could control a pair of chimeras.”

“I suspect Emperor Darkmor had a hand in this.” Lexa glances around the people in the hall. “Where is the second beast?”

“We believe we have it cornered in the east wing living quarters.” Nathanial reports.

Lexa nods. “Take a group of engineers with you. I want the west side entrance sealed, it cannot be allowed to remain open.”

Tash steps forward and says, “I recommend a reinforcement of the tunnel and the use of some of our own explosives to trigger a rock fall to seal the entrance.” Tash pauses and Lexa nods for her to continue. “I recommend Lucas head the team, he has invaluable knowledge of explosives.”

Lexa nods. “See that it is done.” Tash moves but Lexa halts her with a further question. “Where is Anne?”

“At the main evacuation point, we are in the process of moving everyone there.”

Tash returns to her task and Lexa lets out a small breath before she turns to Nathanial. “I want twenty well-armed rebels to go with you and lock this creature in the east wing. I will organize a team of animal workers to devise the best way to dispose of the creature. They are not easy to kill.”

Nathanial nods, turns on his heel and strides down the hall.

Lexa calls over a small group of people, organizes them and sends them off into the tunnels to look for anyone who didn't make it to the evacuation points.

She is preparing to join a search party herself when Tash stops her. "Lexa, the people are uneasy and would greatly benefit from seeing you alive and well. Your presence will do more to boost morale than my words ever could."

Lexa considers Tash's words, and her eyes show the internal battle raging in her mind as she makes her decision. A moment passes, and Lexa nods. Tash leads us down the corridor.

I trail behind them, trying to ignore the burning pain in my chest from my aggravated arena injuries. Bright red spots of blood sneak out from under my bracer, dirt coats my skin and I shake my head. So much for keeping it clean. The throbbing in my arm is a familiar burn that can only mean one thing, my stitches have ripped. Sighing, I make a mental note not to fight any more monsters until I feel better.

My forearm hurts and I lift the sleeve of my shirt to see what I have done to it, and a flash of blue catches my attention. I stop and stare at my arm. Three blue lines intersect and glow against my skin, the same color as the light my necklace had created. I rub my skin and pain flares as my fingers brush the lines. Warmth spreads through my fingers, and I pull them back. Sharp pain prickles behind my eyes and slows my thoughts. What is this?

My eyes flick over to Lexa who has stopped just ahead and quietly speaks with Tash. Has this happened to Lexa? I search her exposed skin with my eyes and find nothing.

Lexa calls out to me, "Claire, are you coming?"

"Yes." I hastily pull my sleeve down, so it hides the blue marks. I hiss softly as the lines burn with the contact from the bracer.

The women in front of me turn into a doorway filled with light, and the sounds of chatter drift from the open door. I catch up with the two women, and together we step into the room.

Chapter Eight

Injured rebels lay on mats or sit propped up against walls. Uninjured people do their best to provide medical attention, water, or comfort to those in need. There are hundreds of people in this large room. I had no idea the rebellion was so big. No idea so many people had managed to escape captivity and find a home with some measure of freedom.

Lexa stands in the entryway, and the whole room stops to look at her. I can see relief and joy in many faces. Lexa doesn't say a word. Slowly she raises her hand, so her closed right fist rests on her chest over her heart. Everyone in the room repeats the action.

Lexa nods and the people in the room resume their various tasks. I don't understand what I have just witnessed, and I am unsure if I am allowed to ask.

Lexa takes in a slow breath, and I can see the effort it takes to hide the pain of her injuries. She moves to the nearest injured rebel and assists with bandaging a nasty arm wound. Many people approach her, and she continues her work as she speaks to each of them. It is easy to see how important Lexa is to them, and in return how important they are to her. I find myself enthralled by the respect and attention Lexa gives to each person. I watch her work for far too long. I look away and meet the eyes of an old woman, who gives me a knowing smile and my cheeks heat up. I should be helping.

A small boy around eight slides up to stand beside me and ghosts my movements as I approach a wall with a line of woven baskets set alongside it.

I turn to face him. "What are you up to?"

The boy's cheeks turn bright red, and he splutters out. "Can I help you?"

I raise my eyebrow. "That depends. Do you have a name?"

The boy nods his head eagerly. "My names Lewi."

I nod. "Nice to meet you Lewi. Do you think you can remember the things I show you?"

Lewi puffs his chest out with pride. "I am very good at remembering what I have seen and heard. All the adults say so."

I smile at his bravado. “Well Lewi, let’s see if we can help.” With that I flip the woven lid of the closest basket and find it filled with medical supplies. I take the hamper over to a man with a deep cut in his arm and settle down beside him as I start to clean his wound. Lewi shadows my every movement and watches intently. I’m not as good at this as my mother would have been. But seasons of having my own wounds treated after arena matches has given me a basic knowledge of what needs to be done to make most people comfortable.

I spend hours treating the wounded and Lewi learns quickly. So many people are severely injured from cave-ins or run-ins with the beast, apparently the second beast found its way into a mess hall during mealtime. I shudder as my mind imagines the panic that must have taken place in that room.

To help pass the time, I listen to the discussions taking place around me as I work and talk with my young companion. The description of this other creature, a brown chimera, gives me the impression it had been smaller than the one Lexa and I encountered. The others’ accounts don’t describe a beast with face appendages like the one we had fought, and I am unsure if they are the same species.

A young man lies beside me, unconscious from the pain his injuries have caused him. Doing my best to be gentle, I wrap his mangled leg in a tight bandage and place a yellow cloth next to him. These cloths are left to tell the actual healers which people have injuries that need a person with more medical training than the average individual.

“I need to go fill this Lewi.” I tell the young boy. “You wait here with this young man and see that he gets help.”

Lewi seems uncertain. “Okay,” he finally says.

I rise and take my basket back to the wall so I can refill it with supplies. I squat by the pile of rough bandages and select some for the basket. A gentle tap on my shoulder startles me, and I twist around to stare up into emerald, green eyes, and a concerned face.

Lexa gestures at my arm. “Has anyone tended your injuries?”

I glance down at my arm and study the stain working its way through my bandage. “I should probably deal with that,” I agree.

I delay acting on my words, because part of me fears more blue lines, but Lexa stands nearby waiting, and I know she won’t go until my wounds have been checked. I reach for my bracer and fumble with the clasp. I

can't remember it ever being this hard to remove. I am about to give up when a gentle hand takes my arm.

Lexa crouches before me. "Here, let me help."

Carefully she removes the bracer, doing her best not to aggravate the wound further as she unwraps the bandage. I scan my arm. The lines are gone. I rub my face with my hand and hold out my injured arm, waiting for Lexa to inspect it.

Lexa cleans the area with a cloth. "You have pulled out three of your stitches."

She takes the med kit from me and rummages through it, pulling out a needle and sinew thread. Lexa looks at me. I nod, and she sets about sealing my wound. I watch her push the needle through my skin, resealing my lacerations. She is efficient and quickly finishes the last stitch before wrapping my arm in a fresh bandage. Lexa props her head up with her hand, and her ordinarily perfect posture is slumped. She could have left my injuries for a medic.

"Thank you," I say.

Lexa has small splashes of blood on her shirt. I'm not sure how much of it is hers. I make a mental note to attempt a check of her injuries when we are in a place more private. I have a feeling Lexa won't reveal an injury to her people. Not when they need her to be strong. And especially when she believes her injuries are less severe than those she treats. I have a suspicion they are not.

Tash enters the room, scans through the people scattered throughout it and spots us. Her and a young man head in our direction. The young man's square glasses magnify his blue eyes until they are enormous big and they roam the room taking in every detail. As they approach, his sandy hair flops around his face and the tangled mess desperately needs a brush. The pair approach us and the tall lanky man looks over me. I can feel the sharp intelligence behind those eyes. A reddish-brown brand bubbles the skin under his eye, '3921,' with it is the symbol of a spanner. Another escaped engineer.

I cannot help but imagine the pain of a face brand. My brand hurt enough that I would even rank it in my top ten most painful experiences—and my brand is on my thigh.

"We have set up a room across the hall for people to sleep in," Tash informs us. "The south wing of the rebel encampment is safe, and we have

patrols watching all entrances.” She nods at us. “You two should get a few hours rest before you pass out on us. Lucas will show you to your bunks.”

The tall, lanky man beside Tash waves at us with a shy smile.

Lexa’s jaw clenches and her eyes glint in frustration as she looks at everything around us that still needs to be done. I lean in, take the medical basket from her, and murmur, “You are no good to anyone if you are so exhausted you cannot raise your sword or think clearly.”

Lexa lets out a long sigh and nods, rising to her feet with grace. I try to get up behind her and fumble, exhaustion making my limbs heavy and uncooperative, but somehow, I manage to rise to my feet.

I smile up at the tall man beside me. “Lead the way, Lucas.”

Lucas returns the gesture and swipes his long hair out of his face as he turns to lead us through the wounded. I turn and wave goodbye to Lewi who stands and waves eagerly in return. We pass through the hall and enter another room. We pad our way through lines of bunks, most are filled with sleeping people wrapped up in warm blankets. We reach the back of the room and find an empty bed, and a bulging knapsack rests upon it. The whole set up is behind a rough dirt wall. I assume this extra privilege is an attempt to give Lexa some privacy.

Lexa’s jaw clenches as she surveys the space, her voice strained, “Why aren’t there more beds behind here?”

Lucas shifts on his feet. “Tash was trying to give you some space, and in any case, there are no more beds. These are all the emergency supplies and what we could scavenge from ruined sleeping areas. We never intended to deal with such a large-scale relocation, people must sleep in shifts.”

Lexa walks around the space as if gauging how much room there is. “We must remedy this as soon as possible.”

Lucas nods and quickly retreats. I survey the space and scan the various storage crates that fill it—if they had more beds, two or three would fit. Lexa moves behind the boxes and stoops to pick up an old cot, far older than the ones around the room, and begins to assemble it, twisting aged wood together. I awkwardly realize I still have the medical basket in my hands and set it on the floor near the wall. With my hands now free I go over to help Lexa with her wooden puzzle. We have just finished stretching an old sack over the wooden poles when Nathaniel rounds the corner.

He looks momentarily surprised to find his leader and me kneeling on the ground assembling a cot. "What is that?"

Lexa sighs and rubs her temples. "It is a bed, Nathaniel."

"Who would sleep on that? It looks like it will collapse the moment anyone puts weight on it."

I look at the cot, it does seem a little rickety. "I don't mind sleeping in it," I offer. "It's better than the stone floor I usually sleep on."

"She is going to sleep in here with you?" Nathaniel snaps. "We met her four days ago, and you are willing to sleep in the same room as her? What if she is here to murder you?"

Four days. Well, that answers how long I was in and out of consciousness for.

Lexa rises to her feet and stares at Nathaniel. "I could have died in that cave in. I was pinned to the wall and had no hope of getting myself free. Claire could have let me die then." Lexa pauses and adds, "I even told her to run, and yet she stayed to free me, risking her life to save mine."

Nathaniel opens and closes his mouth unsure of what to say. Eventually, he settles on silence.

Lexa levels him with a stare. "I trust her. Now did you come here to scold me, or are you here for a reason?"

Nathaniel looks down at his feet and clears his throat. "I will have water and food sent to you."

With that, he turns and leaves. Lexa rubs her face and sits down on the cot we just assembled. It creaks alarmingly but holds.

I gingerly sit down next to her causing the bed to groan further. "Is he always like that?"

"Nathaniel is just overprotective," Lexa says through her hands.

She rubs her temples, and I spot faded green lines on her neck. "Do you have a headache?"

"Yes, I have had it since the cave in."

My next question dies on my lips as I turn to see a group of young children holding a large pot of water.

I nudge Lexa, and she looks up from her hands and smiles at the children who swarm her.

A small boy tugs Lexa's sleeve. "Lexa, did you kill the monster in the tunnels?"

“Was it big?” chirps another boy.

An older girl hushes the children before caving, asking, “Are we safe now?”

Lexa holds up her hands and waits for the children to quieten. “Yes, we are safe.”

The children all start to speak at once. But before they can ask too many questions, a plump older woman rounds the corner with a blanket in her hands.

“Alright children off to bed, leave them be,” the woman instructs.

Lexa kneels to the ground, and the children rush her for a hug. The smallest girl, with blonde hair, manages to circle back and claims a second hug before the older woman ushers her off.

“Here you go, dearie,” says the older woman as she hands me the blanket in her arms. “I was told you didn’t have one.”

I take the blanket from her. “Thank you.”

The old woman nods and leaves. Lexa stands up, and I unroll my blanket and lay it out on the bed. I strip off my armor. The blood and dirt covering it make for an unappealing image, and I smile ruefully at the memory of being clean after my first hot bath. Unfortunately, that didn’t last as long as I would have liked. I turn to find Lexa removing her shirt and attempting to put on a clean one.

There is a deep swollen gash on her shoulder and the skin around it is already showing blue and purple blotches.

“You are hurt,” I say.

“I know,” comes a quiet reply.

“Let me help you.”

Lexa stands in front of me wearing only a chest binding and pants. She nods ever so slightly. I have to force myself to swallow as I turn to find items to treat her with. I take a deep breath and collect the water bowl and the medical kit. I go over to her and begin cleaning the dirt from her wound. I remove tiny bits of rock from the injury carefully working them out with the clean cloth. My mind flashes to a falling rock and Lexa's gasp of pain. My stomach twists and my eyes close as I force the memory away. That rock should have hit me.

I let out a slow breath and make an attempt at conversation. “You are an excellent fighter.”

Lexa takes in a sharp breath as I work a small stubborn stone out of her injury. "Thank you. You are not so bad yourself." She looks back at me, a smile on her face.

I shrug with a smile. "What can I say? I'm great."

Lexa lets out a small laugh and shakes her head at my words. I retrieve the needle and thread and use them to close the wound on Lexa's shoulder. Returning to my backpack, I collect my stolen healing paste and smear a generous amount of it on her injury. As I do so, I notice the green lines on her neck have faded completely. I busy myself with wrapping a bandage around her shoulder and chest in an attempt to keep the clean covering in place.

We use what remains of the water and do our best to wipe ourselves clean. I collect my armor from the pile on the floor and drape it over a crate, so it is out of the way. I rummage through my backpack but the only clothes I have to change into is my old singlet and grey shorts which are about as worn as clothing can be, and holes have started to work their way into the seams. I pull the shirt to get a better look at the new gap on the side. The material rips and falls apart in my hands. I sigh and hold the sizable chunk of material in my hand, my stomach is now entirely exposed. Why do I even bother wearing this, it's not like it's doing much anyway.

Lexa lets out a chuckle at my predicament and throws me a shirt from her backpack. I quickly swap my old one for this new one. I hold the tattered parts of my old singlet in my hands unsure of what to do with it. I look at it for a moment and stuff it into my bag. That's a later problem.

I look up to find Lexa fingering her necklace through her shirt as she stares at the wall. I want to talk to Lexa about our necklaces, to tell her about my quest, and to ask her about the painful light on my skin and the headache. But now is not the time. We are both tired, and in this quiet room, it would be too easy to be overheard.

I stand and gaze at the room lined with cots and all the displaced rebels. Were those chimeras here looking for me? It wouldn't be the first time Emperor Darkmor has employed the use of beasts to find a wayward slave. It's too soon since the cerebi to dismiss the possibility. Surely, he doesn't hunt down every slave in this manner or this rebel base wouldn't be so full of people.

It could be because I am such a well-known slave, but a rumor could be spread that said I died of my injuries. My thoughts drift back to Kathrine's words regarding my mother's lineage.

My thoughts collide and tumble over one another trying to make desperate and confusing links. I'm too tired for this type of thinking.

I return to my cot and shove my bag and boots under it, I cast one last look at Lexa before I crawl under the covers. I roll around, the bed creaking as I search for a comfortable position. Finally, after much tossing and turning, I find a warm spot and bury my head in the blanket.

Chapter Nine

I am trapped in the arena, a huge man with ice blue eyes laughs at me as I fend off a hungry cerebi with a metal pole. The cerebi lunges at me, and I swing my weapon and it passes right through the beast as if it were a ghost. The laughing man turns into Nathaniel who points accusingly at me, “You will be the death of her.”

Lexa runs through the arena, a bunch of young children at her heels. She stops and smiles at me. An uncomfortable flutter awakens in my stomach as I smile back. But then her body is covered in green brightly lit lines, splitting apart her flesh and she is screaming.

Mother tells her to lay down and begins wrapping her wounds with a bandage. I rush over to help, and mother looks at me, “You must find the others.”

“What others?” I ask.

Mother begins to rock as the dream fades into a small dark cell. She mutters, “Green, blue, yellow, purple, red, orange. Green, blue, yellow, purple, red, orange. Green, blue, yellow, purple, red, orange.”

“Mother?” I tentatively reach out to her, and her eyes snap to mine.

She clutches desperately at my arm in a way that is painful. “FIND THEM!”

I startle awake covered in sweat and breathing heavily. Snore and the soft sounds of the sleeping people who fill the room around me. Closing my eyes, I count my breaths forcing each of them to be slower than the last until it evens out and the tightness in my chest fades.

I rub my face and bury my head in the blankets. What a messed-up dream. A lot has happened in the last few days, and the necklaces and their powers keep returning to the front of my mind. I let out a long slow breath. It has been a long time since I have had a dream that intense. The last time was the night before my father went to his last arena match. The one he couldn’t win.

I stare at the ceiling, eyes travelling over the bumps and grooves of the hand dug room. My thoughts drift to my necklace. How was it possible that it had created that light shield? Lexa told me that crystals could be filled with power from someone with the gift. But she had spoken about

simple things like crystals that warm and light a room. This magic seemed to have a life—it changed and grew.

My mother hadn't said a word about the gems ability to create light. I pull the necklace from my shirt and twist it through my fingers. I peer at the glimmering gem, so innocent and ordinary. I have a feeling this won't be the last surprise thrown my way before this is all over.

I can't believe I found another necklace so fast. It is strange how it has turned out. If I had run in a different direction. If the cerebi didn't chase me. If I hadn't been with Lexa when I encountered the chimera. So many things had to happen the way they did for me to discover this necklace. For me to meet Lexa. Fate. I had never been one for fate, but the circumstances did call for consideration.

I glance at the empty bed next to me, its covers made ready for the next person. I should get up too. Grumbling, I struggle up and sit with my legs off the side of the bed. I can't help my wince at the pull of sore, stiff muscles. For a moment I seriously consider the pros and cons of not getting out of bed. I hate mornings, and sore muscles don't exactly fill me with the desire to move around. I sigh. Nothing is accomplished by lying in bed.

I spy a man sitting on the bed next to me, his leg wrapped in a bloody bandage and a pile of clothes beside him. Steadily he works through the mound, mending with a steady pace. Even this guy found a way to help while I'm lying in bed. I climb out of my warm blankets. I rest my feet on the cold floor and hurry to pull on my clothes. I struggle to yank on my boots and armor in my half-asleep state. Growling in frustration, I yank at my boot. It takes far too long for me to realize I am trying to put it on the wrong foot. Sighing, I take it off and start again.

Once I have successfully put my clothes on, in all the right places, I inspect my armor and crinkle my nose at the streaks of dirt and blood that are splayed across its surface. I reach for the washcloth in the bowl beside me and scrub at my armor. My first attempts do nothing more than spread the blood and dirt across the surface, and it takes many return trips to the washbowl, but at last, I get them clean. I throw the dirty cloth into the washbasin with a splash and inspect my clean-ish armor. It's better. I can now be around others without offending them with my appearance. So much for that bath. I don't think I stayed clean for more than half an hour.

I eye the bowl of brownish red water. What am I supposed to do with it? I can't leave it here for someone else to deal with. After all, I am the one who made the mess. I grab the heavy stone bowl and pad my way through the makeshift dormitory, quietly dodging cots, and possessions. I wander through the halls and discover many maintenance crews working to reinforce the walls to help prevent the cave in from spreading. It seems oddly efficient, I hadn't even considered the cave in could spread, but then again, these people know more about tunnel maintenance than I probably ever would.

An old woman with a bent back and a well carved wooden cane stops and peers at the bowl in my hands with a raised brow. "What are you doing with that?"

I drag my eyes from the extremely rare and beautiful piece of wood and glance at the swirling water. "I am looking for somewhere to dispose of it."

The woman nods, her wispy white hair falling from her tie. "This way."

I follow obediently behind her, and she leads me to a washroom. Clothes hang everywhere, and many people crowd around steaming buckets cleaning fabrics. A whole section of the room is dedicated to drying washed bandages.

Another woman walks in through the door carrying a basket of freshly mended clothes and sits by one of the steaming tubs and begins cleaning them.

The aged woman indicates a channel in the floor like the one I had seen in the bathrooms, and I pour the water into it, grateful for it to be gone.

The elderly woman eyes my armor. "You should clean them."

My cheeks redden, and I look at the floor avoiding her eyes. Finally, I nod silently. She doesn't need to know I had already tried.

She places her hand on my arm, guides me to one of the empty wash tubs, and holds out her hand. "Pass them here, I will show you how."

I hasten to pull off my armor, and the lady makes a grunt of disapproval at the state of my shorts as she pulls up her sleeves, revealing wrinkled and almost transparent skin. "Give yourself a quick scrub, that tub over there will be fine. Leave the clothes here I'll start cleaning them."

I retract my hand from my armor and hurry over to the indicated trough and give my arms, face, and legs a good scrub. My skin is pink before I decide I'm clean enough.

I make my way over to the lady and kneel beside her on a pile of stacked reeds, and she shows me how to rub the leather so it will come clean but keep its shape. I go to work, and soon others come and sit around us. Some mend clothing, others fold washing, and all of them chatter happily.

An older man with stripes of jagged scarring across his face mends a set of well-worn trousers that looked far too small for him. "I heard the west side tunnels will be ready to access in a few weeks. Excavation is taking longer because the tunnels must be reinforced as they go. Those chimeras made a right real mess."

The old woman beside me nods. "It would be faster if Lexa allowed us to help them."

The man nods sagely.

These two are the oldest humans I have ever encountered, and their hands are swollen and sore, and their movements are pained. How do they think they could help clear a cave in?

The man murmurs in agreement, "I suppose she has her reasons though. Concerned about our wellbeing and all."

The woman scoffs, "My wellbeing, all I do is sit around and be cared for. The only time I get to help is when I sneak off here and help with the laundry. I want to be of more help."

The man ties off the knot on the pants and sets them aside. "Eldri, you know the cost of what you are suggesting is too high. Lexa would never allow us to sacrifice ourselves in that way."

Eldri huffs and scrubs vigorously at my leather pants. After a few moments, she pauses and looks up at the man, her face pleading. "Amder, she saved us and cares for us in more ways than I can count. We owe her more than sitting around and letting others toil for weeks over something we could achieve in a day."

Amder sighs and holds up the pants once more, as he inspects them. "I'm sure there will come a day when Lexa needs our gifts for something others cannot achieve."

I drop my leather tunic in surprise and slosh an impressive amount of water as my hands dive after it. Are these the elders Lexa mentioned?

Curiosity burns inside of me, and there are so many questions I want to ask. I shouldn't. Their conversation hadn't included me, and asking something now would mean admitting I had been listening.

Eldri is looking at me with a curious expression, and I am suddenly reminded of the woman who had smiled at me after the cave in.

"Yes, that was me," Eldri confirms.

My eyes widen, and I drop my tunic under the water for a second time. Eldri patiently retrieves it for me. I blink at her. Was that just a coincidence or did she hear my thoughts?

Ander smiles at me, revealing a missing front tooth. "Your thoughts are not as quiet as you believe they are."

Eldri dries her hands and pats my shoulder. "It's okay, everyone is unsettled at first."

I gape at her, unsure of what to say. Or think for that matter.

I am rescued by Ander. "You had a question?"

I furrow my brow. I did? It's hard to think back to what my thoughts were before I found out they were suddenly not private.

Ander smiles at me. "They are private. We can only hear what you think loudly."

"How do I stop thinking loudly?" I blurt.

Eldri takes my armor and hangs it near an orange crystal to dry. It quickly begins to steam. "When you feel a lot of emotion behind something, you think it loudly, and we can hear you."

Emotion. Okay. I take a slow breath and calm my racing heart. I repeat this a few times and look at the pair questioningly.

Ander bows his head. "We can't hear you now. But feel free to ask us your question anyway."

"What is the cost of using your gift?"

I am met with two sets of raised eyebrows. Apparently, this is not the question they had been expecting.

Ander recovers first. "We are weakened. Using our gift draws from our life force, and when used to extremes shortens it."

I glance at my bandaged arm, "Do you experience any strange physical changes or pains?"

I am met with silence. Eldri clears her throat, "That is not a reaction gifted people experience when using their magic."

I stare at my boots. What does this mean? What happened to me? What do those lines mean?

Amder's palm settles on my shoulder. "The answers you are looking for will come in time." He holds up the mended pants. "These are for you. I can't allow you to wear that tattered excuse for clothing any longer."

I carefully take the pants from him and hold them close. "Thank you."

He nods. "Well go put them on. They won't do you any good sitting in your hands."

I move behind a line of drying blankets and get changed. The pants fit well and are pleasantly warm, or maybe that's just in comparison to the shorts.

I step out from behind the sheets and am greeted with smiles. "That looks much better," chirps Amder.

Eldri hands me my warm and dry leathers, and I pull them on. Surprised to find that without all the dust and grime they are actually closer in color to dark blue than the faded brown I had believed them to be. How many seasons of neglect had caused them to become that color?

"Thank you," I say feeling giddy with all the gifts I have received in the last few hours.

"That's alright, best you be off now. You have a big day ahead of you," Eldri remarks.

I wave goodbye and go out into the hall, my mind flooded with questions. I should go find Lexa and talk to her about the events that took place during the cave in. I want to know if she understands how the necklaces behave any better than I do. I couldn't talk to the gifted elders about my reaction without revealing how I had come across it.

I'm not sure I am ready for others to know I have a magical necklace. But Lexa might know, or at least have some theories, after all, she has a necklace. I should ask her to join me on my quest to find the other necklaces. I feel a prickle of apprehension.

Can I trust her? She had a necklace and seems to be the leader of these rebels, but that doesn't mean she can be the kind of ally I am looking for. Then there are all the people here. They need Lexa. How could I ask her to leave? But if my mother is right, finding these damned necklaces will mean a better life for everyone.

Only if you succeed, the nasty voice in my head reminds me.

Lewi runs up to me a small group of friends in tow. He tugs on my sleeve. "Claire will you be helping people again today?"

"I probably will," I say, admiring the boys' enthusiasm to help others. "But first I need to find some food and talk with Lexa."

Lewi points down the hall. "The mess hall is this way!" Eagerly him, and his friends nudge me in the right direction.

His friends tumble around us and the smallest girl tugs at my hand. "You and Lexa are like superheroes."

"Yeah!" exclaims an older boy. "You two are totally bad ass. Killing that chimera in an epic battle."

The littlest girl points accusingly at the boy and wails, "I'm going to tell mummy you have been swearing again!"

A look of genuine panic crosses the older boy's face. "It's not a swear word if I meant it in a good way."

"It is!" The youngest girl bellows and runs off. Presumably in search of her mother.

The older boy curses loudly and sets off in pursuit. The smell of cooking catches my attention and a loud grumble from my stomach accompanies the scent, a reminder I haven't eaten since the encounter with the chimera. Apparently fighting massive monsters, creating walls of light and escaping cave-ins makes a person extremely hungry.

Lewi and his smaller band of friends lead me to a room filled with people, the children wave goodbye and run off into the room. I quickly locate the line of folks waiting for their meals. I peek ahead and watch a young boy serve a good sized helping of soup into a bowl and hand it to the person at the front of the line. It smells fantastic.

I wait in the queue for my turn. Fidgeting with my hands I try to stand still, but my hunger gnaws at my stomach and makes me impatient. I finally make it to the front of the line, which in all honesty doesn't take that long. Still, hunger makes the wait drag by as if each individual second stretched an eternity.

The young boy hands me a full bowl and a chunk of bread, but before I can leave, a second chunk makes its way onto my tray. I give the boy a questioning look, everyone else has received just one piece of bread.

The boy gives me a cheeky smile. "Maybe this time you won't have to eat another person's dinner."

My cheeks heat up for what feels like the hundredth time in as many days. "Thank you."

I remove myself from the line and head into the crowded room, looking for a place to sit. I make my way to the room's far end. Away from everyone. I don't want to make another spectacle of myself while I eat this meal. I'm hungry and don't need people watching me eat in alarm. I lean against the wall and slide to the floor. Wincing as pain burns through my still healing leg.

I gingerly rub my leg. "Stupid cerebi."

I pick up a hunk of bread, and its warmth seeps into my chilled fingers. I break it open, and a cloud of steam rises from it, diffusing the space around me with a scent that cannot be ignored. I take a small bite, and the flavor of the bread just about blows me away. This is nothing like the stale bread from the compound. It's moist, and another taste mixes with the flour. I look at the bread and find orange flakes throughout it. I pull one out and inspect it, holding it close to my face.

"I take it you like the bread," a familiar female voice cuts through my inspection.

My head snaps up, and my vision is filled with a mane of brown hair and deep green eyes. "Lexa, do you have to sneak up on me like that? You scared the bejeebers out of me," I complain and return to my food, dunking a chunk of my bread into my thick soup.

Lexa smiles as she slides down the wall to sit next to me, a bowl of soup in hand. "Actually, I was loud in my approach. You would have heard me if you hadn't been so focused on your food."

I take a defiant bite out of my bread and glare at Lexa, which does nothing to stop the smile on her face. We sit and eat our soup enjoying the quiet company. It's not long before my food is gone, but I pride myself on the fact that Lexa doesn't finish long after me.

Lexa turns her gaze to me. "I think we should talk about what happened yesterday in the cave in."

I nod. "Do you have a private place where we can talk?"

Lexa rises to her feet. "Of course, follow me."

I follow Lexa to the wash bucket, and we clean our dishes before we leave the room. We walk through the halls, and Lexa leads us to a large open room. Rows of brick boxes fill the space, each of them teeming with plants of one kind or another. There are many glowing crystals here

packed together tightly in rows. Far more than I have seen in any other room.

I walk over to the nearest box and peer inside. Three rows of small leafy plants fill the crate. I inspect the orange leaves closely and am astounded by how complex this little leaf looks. Purple veins spread out from the leaf's spine and fan across its flesh. I have never seen a living plant before. The closest I had to this is a glimpse of mushrooms that occasionally grow around the compound. But stories of people hallucinating and being violently ill prevented me from ever inspecting them closely.

Lexa steps up beside me, plucks one of the orange leaves, and holds it out. "It is a Kafid plant. We use the leaves for food, they are extremely nutritious, and the roots once boiled, are dried and crushed. They are excellent for drawing infection from a wound."

The leaf is soft and flexible, I sniff it, and a slight aroma fills my senses. "Can I try some?"

Lexa smiles. "That's why I picked it."

I tear off a section of leaf and pop it into my mouth. A sweet flavor rolls across my tongue with the foliage. I am pleased with the taste and happily chew on the rest of the stem. It's familiar, and I tilt my head as I munch the plant. The bread. This is the strange flavor in the bread.

I look around the room. "You grow your own food."

Lexa walks ahead of me through the rows. "Yes. We have other rooms like this. Carting food to our location would bring unnecessary attention to us. So, we grow what we can, hunt what we need, and go without what we can't make ourselves."

I nod. This place is amazing, and I doubt Emperor Darkmor would have allowed it to exist if he knew about it. I assume they have gone to great lengths to keep it hidden. Lexa leads me over to a strange can and sets it under a metal contraption. She grabs the handle and begins pumping it up and down.

Within a few minutes, water spurts from the end and into the large container below it. Once the canister is full, she takes it back to the plants and tips it over them. The water sprinkles out of the can and lands gently on the plant's delicate leaves. The droplets land in little beads that bunch and roll down the foliage, pooling in the center of the plant, reminding me of a bowl.

I glance around the room and realise we are alone. I'm surprised Lexa has found a place to talk while still managing to do what needs to be done. I suppose I'll get right to it then. "Your necklace. Did you know it could do what it did in the cave in?"

Lexa shakes her head. "No. Not really. Well, there was once, but I am unsure if it was a dream." Lexa pauses lost in thought before shaking her head and continuing, "From time to time, I have seen it glow when I have felt a powerful emotion. But the cave-in was the first time I am sure I have seen it project light."

Lexa hands me the watering container and indicates the plants still in need of water. Unsure, I tip the can, and sprinkles of water fall from it, landing on the leaves with a soft patter. The scent of rich earth spreads with the water, and I like the effect.

I move on to the next plant. "Me either, but I haven't had mine for very long. My mother gave it to me before her review."

Lexa retrieves a set of scissors from a cupboard nearby. "It is unusual magic. I haven't seen anything like it before."

"Do you think the crystal was made by someone with the gift?"

Lexa carefully clips bulbs off a small green vine nearby and places them in a bowl. "It could be." Lexa sets down her scissors. "May I see your necklace?"

I put the can on the floor beside me and pull off my necklace. I hold it for a moment. The desire to keep it in my possession is strong. I release a slow breath and hand it to Lexa. She removes her own necklace and passes it to me. Lexa's necklace is a flat square similar in size to my own. The most significant difference is the color—where mine is a brilliant sapphire blue, Lexa's is vibrant emerald, green.

Lexa turns my necklace in her fingers. "I have tried to make it light up like it did in the cave in, but my attempts have been unsuccessful."

I fidget with her necklace. "My mother told me there are five other necklaces, and that the people with them would be special."

Lexa raises her eyebrow. "Five others?"

Tingles erupt in my stomach, and I swallow hard. I guess this is it. "Yes. She told me I would need to find them all to defeat Emperor Darkmor."

Lexa nods and hands back my necklace in silence. I take the gem in my hand and give Lexa hers. Our fingers brush, and a jolt of energy rushes

through me, and the necklaces in our hands glow.

We stare at the glowing gems for a moment before Lexa pulls her hand away, bringing an abrupt end to the light.

My hand hangs in the air. Does it work on contact? Slowly I reach out and take Lexa's cool hand firmly in my own. The gems burst into light, filling the room with dancing green and blue light. The light wavers and weaves a protective bubble around us.

"Why do they do that?" Lexa breathes.

I stare in awe at the dancing colors. "I don't know."

I release Lexa's hand, and a strange sense of loss creeps through me as I let my hand fall back to the watering canister. The light shimmers around us as it fades, lingering for a few moments before it vanishes altogether. I bow my head and my skin prickles. My mother was right, and I didn't believe her.

Lexa's eyes are distant and unfocused as she tugs on her necklace. "There are six gems."

I nod, but she doesn't see me. I should ask her to come with me. She has a necklace, and it would be nice not to be alone as I blunder through a quest with only the vaguest of information. The only problem is that I must ask her to leave people who need her. I will be asking her to leave a place that is safe.

I have almost talked myself out of it when Lexa's eyes dart to mine. "I must find my sister. Do you know how to get back from here?"

Lexa has a sister? I wonder why I haven't met her. Then I berate myself, Lexa is the leader of a rebel camp, she is not going to share everything with someone who is basically a stranger.

I try to recall how we got here, but the twisting labyrinth of tunnels is not something I have learned to navigate yet. A young man with long blonde hair and square glasses walks into the room.

"Lucas," Lexa says a little too loud. The man starts and looks over at us. "Can you assist Claire? There is something I must do."

Lucas nods and Lexa runs from the room. I furrow my brow and stare after her.

Lucas comes over to stand beside me and looks at the half-harvested bulbs and the watering can at my side. "Were you helping in the gardens?"

"Lexa was teaching me to water them, and instructing me on what parts can be used," I say in a distant voice. My mind is still occupied by

the events that had taken place.

Lucas sends me a grin. “I can help you with that. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m kind of an expert around these parts. Botany is one of my specialties.”

I smile at him. Lexa is gone now, and with her, the answers to her strange behavior. I might as well take Lucas up on his offer and learn what I can. “That would be great.”

A cluster of gossiping women walk into the room and sit around a garden bed, carefully harvesting small pink berries from the tall plants.

I work with Lucas, and he is a good teacher. He quickly instructs me on the basics and I learn how to identify poisonous plants and which parts are edible. He shows me this as we harvest plants for the evening meal.

Lucas excitedly shows me the bulbs Lexa had been harvesting. “I recently discovered when you boil these down and collect the vapors the liquid is volatile and alcoholic.”

I pick up the little green bulb. “Why would you want to drink something volatile?”

Lucas shrugs. “It doesn’t taste too bad once your tongue goes numb.” My eyes flick up to him, I let it go and tune back into his words.

He smiles and gestures wildly. “I have been collecting them and making a batch for a while now.”

I put the bulb back. “And which were you trying to make originally? The alcohol or the volatile liquid?”

Lucas smiles. “Which would you rather believe? That I was making something volatile and accidentally drank it. Or that I was making something alcoholic and accidentally blew it up?”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. I’m quickly learning Lucas is a little enthusiastic when it comes to explosions. “I’m going to go with the first option. You accidentally drank it.”

Lucas lets out a bark of laughter. “Oh, boy did I get a surprise when I drank from the wrong cup. It was the most horrendous thing I had ever put in my mouth.”

“What did you do?”

He loads me up with an armful of bowls and collects the rest. He leads us from the room. “I found Tash as fast as I could and persuaded her to drink it too.” His face splits into a huge grin. “Her face was worth the fifteen minutes it took for me to convince her.”

Tash appears in a doorway and joins us. “What awful things is he telling you about me?”

Lucas places the back of his hand to his forehead with dramatic flair. “We will never tell.”

Tash smirks at him. “We’ll see.”

We turn into a doorway filled with many people at work chopping meat and vegetables. Something delicious is cooking in a big pot that rests on a metal plate above another orange crystal.

Tash helps me unload my bowls onto a counter. “Lexa sent me to find you. She wants to talk to you about something.”

I place the last bowl on the counter. “What about?”

Tash shrugs. “I don’t know. She and Anne were excitedly reading through some books when I left.”

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose. “Well, my work here is done. I bid you ladies farewell.” He gives us a mock bow and exits the room.

Tash pokes my arm. “Lexa's this way.”

I follow her back into the labyrinth of corridors.

Chapter Ten

I follow Tash through the halls, and she leads me to a room with a yellowed curtain across the doorway. We pull the cloth aside, step over the threshold, and enter an extravagant chamber. I look around in awe, my mouth hanging wider than is polite. The area has been carved so all the walls are a type of shelving. Every available space is filled with books and scrolls of every size and shape. Some look extremely old and delicate, like the smallest breath of air will cause them to crumble to dust. I step into the room, and I can't help but wonder at the wealth of information in front of me. How many years of knowledge must be trapped in these books? How many life stories?

I find myself drifting over to the nearest shelf, my eyes drift over countless books, spines wrapped in leather. I reach out and touch the nearest book, the spine of the book wrinkled from reading. I stop and pull my hand away. This is not what I am here for.

I turn my attention to Lexa who is surrounded by books and sitting at a red mud brick bench.

Lexa's long hair cascades down her shoulder and settles on her arm, her green eyes dart excitedly across the page in front of her. Another woman leans over her shoulder and points to a page in the book they are both reading. She looks remarkably like Lexa, her bright blue eyes show great intelligence. Her skin is a few shades lighter, but the resemblance is there. Tash nudges me towards the women and leaves without saying a word. The new woman takes a seat beside Lexa and turns the book so they can both read it.

They are so involved in their task, they haven't even noticed my presence. I awkwardly clear my throat after a prolonged silence. "Lexa?"

Lexa looks up and graces me with a full toothed smile that lights up her whole face and has me momentarily lost for words. "Claire this is my sister Anne." Lexa gestures vaguely to the woman beside her and returns to the page she was examining.

Anne waves at me and her eyes give me a once over. "So, you are the infamous Claire that Lexa won't stop talking about?"

My eyebrows rise of their own accord. "Lexa has been talking about me?"

Anne lets out a mischievous smile and takes in a breath. Lexa makes a sudden movement under the table and Anne yelps and bends to rub her shin. Lexa's ears turn pink, and she returns to examining the page in front of her like nothing happened.

Anne clears her throat and carefully restarts her sentence, "You caused quite a stir when you arrived with the cerebi, and Lexa has spoken about your encounter with the chimera."

I fiddle with the hem of my shirt. "Those are probably not my finest moments."

Anne is quick to reply, "Not the way Lexa tells them."

There is another quick movement under the table, and Anne jumps to her feet and makes a great show of picking up a book and stepping away from Lexa.

Lexa scowls at her and returns her attention to me. "Have you ever heard the tale of Celestia?"

I shake my head. I'm sure I would have remembered a word like that. "What is Celestia?"

"A tale from long ago about the misuse of magic and the power of a phoenix. The tale isn't important right now, the important part is a mention of six gems."

Lexa motions for me to come and sit in the chair beside her, the one Anne had been occupying moments before. I cross the room and take a seat on the flat bench and look down at the small book. The first page is filled with a drawing of a woman in the sky surrounded by a bright yellow light. Flying in the background is a massive flaming bird, easily twice the size of a human.

I reluctantly look at the words. I had been taught to read by my parents. Hours had been spent scratching words into the walls of our cell, hours of writing on scrap papers my mother had snuck out from the infirmary. I often used charcoal my father had 'borrowed' from unaware guards with too full pockets. But even with all that practice, my ability to read isn't great. I can do it, but I'm slow. I love to read, but the idea of reading out loud in front of these obviously well learned women has my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Lexa looks between me and the book and seems to see my discomfort. "Perhaps Anne could read it out for us."

Anne looks mildly surprised at the comment but takes the book and paces the room with it. She clears her throat and reads in a clear flowing voice:

“And she rose in a flash of blinding light. A luminosity so bright one must turn away for fear of blindness. The radiance of this light pulsed through the land and dispelled the power of the pretender. The light birthed six crystals of different colors, clustered together as if they were one.

These remarkable stones are nothing like I have witnessed before. They are siblings even with their differences. They respond to one another in a way no gem does. Together they are more powerful than the sum of their parts, but these gems do not respond to everyone. They are a gift from our Phoenix, but they present a grave danger if they are in the wrong hands. Why our great protector thought them necessary is beyond my understanding. But the Phoenix has powers beyond my reckoning and never does something without a purpose.

My King and Queen think the Phoenix wanted to store the magic for later use, but I cannot fathom why. The realm is safe, we are at peace. For now, at least. The gems are to be dispatched to their new owners soon, and I pray they are worthy of heart. Power such as this can too easily be manipulated to the owner's pleasure. History tells that power corrupts even those who begin with the best of intentions. Oh, Phoenix may they find a worthy home.

-Lord Finley.”

Six gems, created by a powerful Phoenix. What even is a phoenix? Who was the woman? Did she know who the gems went too? I calm my racing thoughts and try to settle on just one question. “Is this text about real events or a made-up story?”

Anne flips the book to look at the plain front cover, and then opens it and reads the first page. “Musings of Lord Finley, Master Tender during the reign of...” Anne squints at the page.

I look at the book in her hand. “What?”

Anne looks up from the book. “It is lost. Some sort of inkblot covers the rest, I can’t read it.”

Lexa rises from her seat and takes the book from Anne, checking it herself. “The text is lost. Whether or not it is a work of fiction we cannot be sure.” She hands the book back to Anne. “However, this Lord Finley

and the position of Master Tender do show up in numerous texts.”

Lexa looks over the image of the woman surrounded by light and her hand lifts to the necklace I know is covered by her light green shirt.

I swallow and try to phrase my question in a way that isn’t obvious to Anne. “Do you think the gems are real?”

Lexa nods. “I think we are already in possession of two of them.”

I flick my eyes to Anne. Lexa follows my look. “I have filled her in. She will need to know this information when she takes over after I leave.”

“You’re leaving?” I splutter, gripping my hands tightly.

Lexa sets the book in front of me. “Yes, I will be accompanying you to find the others.”

I blink. “You are?” I repeat stupidly.

Lexa nods with enthusiasm. “A quest like this could achieve everything we have been fighting for. We could never hope to build the numbers necessary to do more than annoy Darkmor and his minions. But these gems, they could make a world of difference.”

“Freedom for our people,” Anne adds after seeing my blank expression. “No more living in the dark.”

Well, that solves the problem of asking Lexa to come with me. I just had to wait for her to invite herself.

This conversation is traveling very fast, and I have to backtrack and reprocess the information. The gems were created by someone powerful in the gift, this Lord Finley knew about their creation, and Lexa is coming with me. My stomach tightens in a way that is not entirely unpleasant at that last thought. I look up and find the two sisters have continued the conversation without me.

Lexa paces the room with energy. “We will need a small team.”

Anne hurries to collect paper and retrieves a carefully wrapped stick of charcoal from a tin. She spreads it across the table and writes a checklist. “They will need a range of skills.”

Lexa nods and turns to face me. “Do you know anything about where the others are?”

I shrug. “I didn’t even know where you were, or that my necklace was imbued with the gift.”

Lexa meets my eyes and bites her lip. “Yes, that will make it difficult. Did your mother tell you anything else?”

I consider her question. “She said the necklace gave her the ability to see the possible future.”

Anne looks up from her frantic writing. “Like visions?”

“I'm not sure. My mother said she had seen a glimpse of a future where Emperor Darkmor doesn't rule us.” I leave out the part about me saving the world. It seems like an arrogant thing to say.

Lexa gives me a look as if she is waiting for me to say more. I look away from her intense gaze and down at my boots as if they are suddenly very interesting. Lexa waits for a long moment before she moves on, “Well that gives us something to search for, people with extraordinary abilities.”

Anne climbs to her feet. “I will see what our contacts know, individuals like that tend to stand out.” Lexa gives her a brief nod, and Anne rushes from the room.

Lexa starts collecting scrolls and books from the piles on the table. “I think that's all we can do until we find out more information.”

I climb to my feet and help her, following with an armload of papers as she takes them one at a time from my arms and returns them to their correct places. “Lexa. When we used the necklaces in the cave in, did you notice any strange after effects?”

Lexa paused to consider my words, “Nothing outstanding, just a few pains from bumps and scratches.” She pauses and tilts her head. “I did have an awful headache, but I assume that was caused by the situation.”

She hadn't noticed the lines. I suppose she was busy though. “After the cave in and before we entered the evacuation room, I noticed three lines on my arm. They were blue.”

Lexa furrows her brows. “Blue lines? Like the color of your necklace?”

“Yes, they were hot and painful to touch. A few hours later they faded.”

Lexa scans my arms with her eyes. “Any lines today? We used the crystals in the gardens earlier.”

I check my arms. Nothing. “Maybe they already faded. Or maybe you have to use so much of the power before it happens.”

Lexa places the last few scrolls on a shelf. “Well, I think we should use the necklaces with caution. At least until we can be sure we understand the repercussions of using them.”

Her words make sense, but I knew I would try to use it again. I want to try and get mine to work independently and explore more why my crystal lights up when I touch Lexa. Mostly, I just want to know how it works.

Lexa leads me out of the room. “We have much to prepare and much to learn.”

I feel like we are only just scratching the surface of a much more complicated problem. But seeing as I don’t know what that problem is, I shrug it off and follow Lexa down the hall.

We walk for about five minutes and a rhythmic beating echoes around the corridor around us. Lexa leads me to a room at the end of the hall, heading straight for the sound. “Given the perils of this mission, you will require weapons.”

“I have a sword,” I reply thinking back to the night I escaped the compound.

Lexa side eyes me. “I inspected what you brought with you, and I believe better weapons are in order.”

I shuffle my feet. I thought my sword was pretty good. It was certainly one of the best in the compound.

We step into the room, and I am blasted with heat. A man works in front of an oven of sorts. It’s packed with coal and burning at a temperature that makes the man’s bulging arms shine with his movements. He wields a heavy hammer and beats at a glowing chunk of metal. A team of small children run around him. One is pumping a massive set of bellows that keeps the coals at their unbearable heat, each gush of wind roars the fire into a hotter state than before. Another boy runs for a bucket of water, and barely dodges past us as he hurries to do his master’s bidding. The last is holding a sword far too big for him against a grinder, sparks flying from the spinning stone wheel as he pumps it expertly with his foot.

Lexa and I step into the room, and a knife flies past my ear and buries itself in the wall behind me. I turn to see it planted in a soft spongy board. Many similar holes inform me this knife throwing is a regular occurrence. I turn to a skinny woman with pale skin and a mass of curly black hair. She plays with one of the many knives attached to the belts strapped all over her body. There must be at least fifty, and those were just the ones I could see. What on Katera would anyone need that many knives for?

Lexa gestures to the woman. "Claire, this is Melissa."

Melissa retrieves her knife from the wall, slips it into position and holds her arm out. I grasp it firmly. She returns the gesture with more pressure than necessary. I squeeze back.

Lexa breaks the tense silence, and Melissa releases my arm. "Claire is here for some new weapons. Would you be so kind as to help her find some that are well suited to her?"

Melissa eyes me and walks off towards the back of the room without saying a word. Lexa nudges me. "Follow her. I know she appears standoffish, but it takes a while for her to warm up to strangers."

Lexa's earnest face persuades me to follow Melissa. I walk in the direction she headed and find her standing in a room filled with swords. I hesitantly step into the room. I don't like being surrounded by weapons with a woman I don't know. Her standoffish behavior doesn't help the situation.

She points at the center of the room. "Stand there."

I follow her instruction and stand quietly as she circles me, scrutinizing me as if I have something to hide. I have a feeling most people would cave at the depth of her stare.

She abruptly walks to the wall and retrieves a sword. She inspects it and hands it to me without a word. I take the sword. It is light. Much lighter than the ones I had received in the Arena. I hold the sword out, and it balances well and has a good grip. I flick the pad of my thumb over the edge of the blade, and it bleeds.

I smile. "This is a fine sword."

I see the briefest smile ghost Melissa's face. She leaves and returns with a leather scabbard. "Side or back?"

It takes a moment to realize she is asking for the preferred position for my sword. "Left side."

She nods, loops it around my waist, takes a nail and marks it. "This way."

I follow her to a large stone where she uses a hammer and nail to punch a line of holes in the belt. She slips on another smaller sheath I hadn't noticed onto the right side and attaches it there. She hands me the belt and walks to the front of the room, retrieves a dagger, and holds it out to me.

Quietly I take it and slip it into the belt. "Thank you."

I loop the belt around my waist, not expecting an answer from Melissa. I look up to find her regarding me. “You are welcome.” With that, she turns and leaves.

I wander out of the room and into the hall. Lexa is there surrounded by a group of people, who seem to be reporting to her. I stand a polite distance away and wait for her.

Lexa excuses herself from the mob and approaches me. “I see it went well.”

“I don’t think it went well at all, as she basically didn’t speak to me.”

Lexa smiles. “Yes, but you still have all your fingers.” I look at Lexa in horror. “It’s okay she hasn’t cut off anyone’s fingers. Not recently anyway.”

I search for words. “That’s how you decide if an encounter with Melissa went well?”

Lexa shrugs. “It’s as good a measure as any. In any case, I must leave, I have a meeting.” She points down the hall. “The kitchens and eating rooms are just up there. I’m sure you can find your way around from there.”

I scowl at her. Lexa hasn’t missed my excitement about food and likes to point it out wherever she can.

Lexa flashes a brilliant smile. “I will see you later in the sleeping rooms?”

I nod, and Lexa walks back into the anxious crowd of people waiting for a moment of her attention. I had known from the moment I met her that Lexa held a leadership position. But as I learn more about this community, I am beginning to think she isn’t a leader, but *the* leader. I hope they will be okay while she is gone. She had said her sister, Anne, would be in charge during her absence. Hopefully, the people respond to her as well as they do to Lexa.

My stomach rumbles. It’s a good thing Lexa pointed out the kitchens. I smile and head off in a search for food.

Chapter Eleven

For the next week, I keep myself busy. Often, I find myself partnered with Lewi, helping treat the people injured in the cave in or by the chimeras as they rampaged through the base. The work is hard, but rewarding, and it keeps my mind from wandering to the task ahead. The job of treating the wounded stops me from overthinking the fact that I have absolutely no idea how to find the other four necklaces.

I am clueless as to where to start, but Lexa seems filled with energy at each of our encounters. Certainly, the daunting task ahead of us doesn't stop her motivation.

I don't share her excitement for the task at hand. I have tried more times than I can count over the last week to use the necklace's power on my own. Only once did I get a brief flicker of blue light. It was so brief I'm not sure if it had actually happened, or I just really wanted it to happen. All my efforts had gained me was one heck of a headache.

A pained moan brings me back to the present. I set down my water canteen next to Lewi and go over to help a young man with a deep gash in his leg. I arrive to find him grunting in pain and his forehead glistening with sweat. I inspect his bandages. They are wet with blood and in need of a change.

"You tried to stand again, didn't you?" I say to the man as I unwind the bandage. I find three ripped stitches and blood sluggishly making its way out of the wound.

The man nods, his face contorted with pain and a touch of guilt. "I cannot just lay here and do nothing. I should be out there helping them secure our home! Since that second beast disappeared people have been fearful it will bring back more."

I remove the broken stitches and work on re-sealing the wound with new ones. "You won't be helpful in your current state."

The man frowns at my statement, but even he cannot deny the truth in my words. I wind the bandage around his leg and help him sit up.

I retrieve my water canteen and convince him to drink. "Give it time and allow your leg to heal. Then you will be able to help. For now, you must rest."

He nods and lays down, his unshaven beard lightly scraping the pillow. "I heard someone killed one of the beasts in the tunnels. I heard it was a pregnant male."

That baffles me. "A pregnant male?"

The man readjusts his pillow, and the light reveals the bags under his eyes. "Yeah, the boys have this crest of horns, and when they are pregnant, the creatures form sacks that are on the side of its face." The man wriggles his fingers near his face giving a visual demonstration of the appendages he is describing. "As the infants develop, they grow from the male's face, on these stems. They stay there until they grow legs and drop off."

I pull a face at the memory. The man mistakes its meaning. "Oh, it's far more horrible than you can imagine, only once have I glimpsed such a beast, and I was lucky to live and tell of it. I would be interested in finding out who killed this one."

I nod and keep quiet. I have never seen ending a life as something I should receive glory for, and I'm certainly not going to start that now.

The man sees I am not going to engage in his gossip. He huffs and his eyes drift shut. "I'm just going to rest my eyes for a bit," he says, and his words fade out. He is asleep in minutes.

Maybe he felt that chatter was a way to stay involved when he physically couldn't? I look at the man and understand his desire to help. There is nothing worse than feeling helpless when there are tasks that need to be done. Especially when they are tasks you know you can do normally.

I repack the clean bandages into the medical basket beside me and take the soaked bandages over to the mountain of rags and dressings to be cleaned. I add it to the precarious pile. I return to collect the medical basket and find the man's breaths slowing, as he slips into a deeper more peaceful sleep. Hopefully, he gets enough rest to battle the bags forming under his eyes.

I gather the medical basket and take it over to where I had been resting and place it near the wall. I lean against the hard rock as I sort through the basket checking to see what needs to be replaced. A bandage rolls away from me, and I scramble to pick it up.

I jump when I see Lexa standing beside me. How long has she been there? "Damn it, Lexa, is it impossible for you to make noise?"

"It is possible to make noise, but why would I deprive myself the opportunity to scare you?" Lexa replies, the corners of her mouth quirking

into a small smile.

I pick up the items I had dropped and throw them in the basket, sending Lexa a glare as I rise to my feet. "What's up? I'm assuming you didn't come here just to scare me."

Lexa sighs. "Sadly no. I do not have time for such frivolous endeavors."

I shoot her another glare.

Lexa ignores the face I give her and continues, "I wish for you to accompany me."

I look up at Lexa's neutral face. Well, that was vague. I set aside the medical basket and rise to my feet. "Sure, I am finished here."

Lexa leads me out of the room.

I keep silent until we are out of earshot. "Where are we going?"

"To have dinner."

My stomach does a flip, and I can't hold back my smile at the mention of food, the notion of three meals a day is still new and exciting to me. It's the small things in life. I catch Lexa's smile and the shake of her head at my childlike joy. My grin widens, and we head for the hall. She leads me in a new direction. This isn't the way to the common eating area.

We stop at a doorway that looks the same as every other we passed. The curtain hangs across it and blocks my view of what is inside. Honestly, I'm not sure how Lexa gets around this place. I have been here over two weeks, and I still get lost. All the halls and corridors look the same.

"Lexa, what are we doing?"

Lexa leads me to the wall opposite the doorway and leans against it and speaks in a low voice, "I have assembled a small team for our journey. It is necessary that our people think I am travelling to another base, and I would never do that alone."

That makes sense. "Does the team know?"

Lexa breathes in. "Not yet. I wanted to speak to you first. Aside from us, the only person who knows is Anne."

I nod. There should be no secrets between leaders. Lexa regards me, her eyes are greener in this light.

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. "Do you trust them?"

Lexa doesn't miss a beat. "With my life."

"How many are there?"

A young woman walks past, and Lexa chooses her words carefully, "Including us, it will be six in all."

That's a few people. "How much do you want them to know?"

Lexa ponders the question, "The more they know, the better we would function as a team. But that comes with another side. The more they know, the more danger they will be in if we are captured."

I nod at her reasoning. "How about we tell them everything except that we have two of the necklaces?"

Lexa nods. "Let us delay no further." She crosses the hall in three strides and sweeps aside the curtain.

This room is not like the others. It looks like a natural cave, and the rolling rock walls bulge and bend as they please. I am surprised to find a wooden table and chairs. This is my first encounter with solid timber furniture here. I had thought there wasn't any. Light crystals have been added to this room but without a pattern. It seems like they were merely put where they would fit in the walls and roof.

A pile of books sit on a natural rock ledge, and hot coals have been brought into the room. They sit nestled in a metal bowl and their red-light spreads throughout the room. The warmth that follows it nuzzles against my skin and fights the cold that clings there. A large scroll is splayed over the table, four crystal weights holding it flat.

They are similar to the lights in color but larger in size. Each of them glows softly, fading in and out as if each wave of light was an inhalation. It takes a few moments before I can tear my eyes away from the crystals to examine the scroll. It is a detailed drawing of what I assumed to be a map of the underground of Shadowsoul, though I cannot be sure as my experience with maps is limited.

People sit around the room, and many dragged chairs away from the table so they could sit by the warm coals. Anne sits nearby deeply engrossed in an old, tattered book. I tilt my head to read the title, *Dragons, Real or Myth?* It must be an ancient book. Even I know dragons are real.

Tash stands talking to Melissa who still displays an array of knives across her belts. Lucas with his floppy hair and large glasses leans back in a wooden chair at a perilous angle. Nathaniel stands off to the side, his well-muscled arms crossed and a general look of boredom on his face. He still sets me a little on edge, and I don't know if I trust him yet. Something

about him tugs vaguely at my memory and prevents me from relaxing in his presence.

Lexa collects a chair and brings it to the circle of warmth. I follow her example and sit in between Lucas and Anne. Everyone seems to take this as a sign the meeting has begun and quiets.

Lexa stands behind her chair and leans forward grasping the edges of the backrest. "We are here because I have decided to join Claire on her mission. We are attempting an endeavor that will hopefully result in the downfall of Emperor Darkmor."

Everyone takes a moment to flick their eyes in my direction.

"I will be leaving my sister in charge during my absence." Lexa gestures in Anne's direction with a casual wave of her hand. "I would like everyone else at this table to join us on the quest. It will be a perilous mission, and you will not be able to discuss it with anyone who isn't in this room. If we are questioned about our journey, we are simply travelling to another base. I do not want to get hopes up in case we fail." Lexa pauses and waits for the nods accepting the cover story. "If you do not wish to join us, you are free to leave now. No one will judge you."

Lexa waits a moment, giving people a chance to leave. No one moves.

Melissa pulls a dagger out and twirls it between her fingers. "I'm sure when I say everyone here will die for a chance to overthrow Emperor Darkmor. All of us have experienced torment and loss during his reign of terror."

Lucas points at his face. "Not to mention branding."

The people around the table nod at their words.

Lexa stands quietly for a moment and takes in the faces of the people around the table. "Lately some things have come to our attention, and I have decided it is prudent to act. Have you heard the tale of Celestia?"

Lucas is quick to reply, "The one with the Phoenix and six gems?"

Lexa nods. Lucas releases a smile. "That was my favorite story as a kid."

Lexa chooses her words carefully. "We have reason to believe it is more than a story. Certain events have led me to consider this tale may actually be a historical one."

Nathanial scowls. "What events?"

"A mixture of rumors and words from a seer."

Tash perks up. "What has a seer said?"

Lexa walks around her chair and takes a seat. “There are six necklaces that when brought together will bring about Emperor Darkmor’s downfall.”

Everyone seems to accept this and waits for Lexa’s next words. Are seers really that trustworthy that people just assume what they say is absolute truth? What status would my mother have received if she was here?

Lexa continues, and I pull my thoughts away from my mother, “We have heard rumors that the people in possession of these necklaces will have abilities that stand out from the norm.”

Tash shifts in her chair. “Like powers?”

“Yes. Such as clairvoyance, telepathy, telekinesis and so on,” Lexa responds. “My sister and I have heard rumors about a man who can read the minds of others. He travels with a group of misfits that perform for towns and villages within Shadowsoul’s less monitored living zones.”

Nathanial huffs and crosses his arms. “How do we know this isn’t a man with a magic trick? A man preying on the weak minded?”

Lexa sighs and rubs her forehead. “We do not. All we have to go on is that his abilities have uncanny accuracy.”

The room shifts once more into an uncomfortable silence. I look at the faces around me. Are they regretting their acceptance of Lexa's terms?

Lexa’s piercing green eyes meet mine. My stomach flutters in a way I have never felt before. I push it away and label it as hunger. After all, it is pretty close to dinner time.

I realize I'm staring and attempt to break the unbearable silence that has settled upon the room. “Do we know where this travelling band is now?”

Lexa flicks her eyes away from mine. “We believe so.”

“Well, that’s better than blindly searching all of Katera,” Nathanial grunts.

Lucas rolls his eyes. “Katera is a bit of an overstatement. The whole problem is that we are trapped in the underground of Shadowsoul. If we could get up to Katera, we wouldn’t be here.”

Lexa looks at Nathanial and purses her lips, I can almost see the comment she withholds. “We believe their next stop will be the farming town of Erast.”

Anne rolls out a large, yellowed scroll from her hands and pegs it to metal clamps in the wall I hadn't noticed before. Revealing a considerable map of Shadowsoul, far more detailed than the one on the table.

I can't help but look at it in awe. The map on the table before this was nice, but it is nothing compared to this. I can see it was drawn with a loving hand. Every section of the map is exquisite in detail. It reveals underground lakes with pictures of monsters, mountain passes, and even caves. Tiny, neat writing is scattered along the surface, naming places and landmarks. The paper itself is yellow and crinkled, showing seasons of age and use.

Anne reaches across the map and points to a black dot along the coast, labeled Erast. "I have reached out to our other communities, and we believe the man is headed to this town."

There are other rebel communities? This group is far larger than I ever imagined, why hasn't Emperor Darkmor registered them as a threat yet? I think back to the chimeras. Maybe he has. I scan the map. "Where are we on the map? And how long will it take to get there?"

Anne eyes me. Obviously unsure if she is allowed to disclose our location to a person who is practically a stranger. A stranger who has convinced their leader to go on a potentially fatal mission with basically no information.

Lexa rises from her chair and points to an area on the map. Her slender finger rests on an area a little down from the prisoner encampment, nestled in some low mountains. "We are here, and it should take us about five days to get there on foot. If we are not troubled by any guards."

"Or any monsters," Lucas chimes in.

"And if we don't get lost," Melissa adds with a small smirk, earning her a shove from Tash.

Tash crosses her arms. "Why do you always have to bring that up? It was one time."

"That one time was traumatizing enough for a lifetime," Melissa quips.

Tash opens her mouth to respond but is stopped by a look from Lexa.

Nathanial points at the map, taking the attention away from Tash. "We should travel through the tunnels and come out on the outskirts of Ethira. That should get us far enough away from the capital to avoid any

patrols that may recognize her,” Nathaniel recommends, tilting his thumb in my direction.

The way he pronounced the word ‘her’ was all too familiar. The derisive sneer I had often encountered when goblins and guards called out my slave number is present on Nathaniel's face right now.

I rise from my chair. “I have a name.” Seasons of being referred to as a number fire me up immediately.

“You will not talk about Claire in such a manner,” a voice cuts across mine. My next words die in my throat as I stop and stare at Lexa. “She saved my life in the tunnels and is more than deserving of your respect.”

I stare at Lexa with wide eyes. Only my parents had ever defended me. I'm a little confused, but at the same time, it's oddly comforting to know there is a person who is on my side because they chose to be. Unlike my parents, Lexa has no obligation to me. I don't realize my mouth is open until Nathaniel clears his throat. I clamp it shut and turn to him. His shoulders are slumped, and he stares at his hands.

“Sorry,” he says and looks up at me. “Sometimes I don't think before I speak. The words were not meant to be hurtful.” He shifts uncomfortably in his chair and looks back at his hands.

I look over his posture and believe his words. “Thank you, I accept your apology.”

Nathaniel gives me a brief nod in acknowledgment and everyone smiles. I get the sense that this is a significant accomplishment for him. Tash reaches up and lays her hand on Nathaniel's massive forearm and gives him a small smile. The smile causes his face to break into a full-blown grin.

A polite, “Hello” brings everyone's attention to the doorway at the end of the room.

Lexa looks away from the map and towards the doorway. “Enter.”

The curtain is pushed aside, and two young men push a cart laden with food into the room. My attitude immediately lightens at the prospects of dinner.

A young man with impressive sideburns wriggles a plate in his hand. “Dinner is ready.”

Lexa smiles at the boys as she works around the table to help them unload their trays. “Thank you for bringing our meals to us Adam and Oscar. It is much appreciated.”

I jump from my seat and help collect a pile of cups and utensils. I hurriedly place them on the table while everyone else relocates the seats.

Oscar gently taps me on the shoulder and mumbles, "Thank you for what you did with the cerebi."

It takes me a moment to realize this is the boy from the cave entrance. I had almost forgotten about him with everything that had happened.

I look at the boy's pink cheeks and take pity on him, "Thank you for sounding the alarm, I would probably be dog food if it weren't for you."

Oscar gives me a small smile and returns to the task of relocating the food from the cart to the table. It doesn't take long for all the food to be set out. The newcomers wave us goodbye as they leave our small meeting room. I look at the abundance of food around me, and my stomach rumbles with hunger. The smell is so pleasant I find it hard to resist. I pull the nearest platter of food towards me and pile its contents onto the empty plate in front of me.

"I have never seen anyone as eager as you are to eat," Melissa claims as she places food on her own plate, at a much slower and more civilized rate than I had.

I pause, my fork halfway between me and my plate as I consider Melissa's words. This is the first full sentence she had said to me.

"Me either." I smile and return to inhaling my meal.

Soft laughter comes from those around us, and everyone digs in.

Once all the food is gone, mostly thanks to Nathaniel and me, we pile the plates and trays back up on the cart and return to the discussion.

Hours pass, mostly filled with planning, and I can do little to help. Being new to the camp and to freedom makes my experience and knowledge limited. But in the end, we have organized what to bring and what items to collect for the trip. Many arguments had been waged about the best tunnel exit to take towards Erast, but eventually, a decision has been reached. We are to take the tunnel at the rear of the base and exit close to the mountains.

I rock back in my chair and glance about. I had given up long ago on keeping up with a conversation that has little to do with me. I catch myself staring at Lexa far too often. She listens intently to everyone and always offers thoughtful, constructive comments. I admire that.

People around the table start to shift in their chairs, and I return my attention to the conversation.

Lexa stands at the head of the table. “We will head to Erast one week from now, after the morning meal.”

We all rise from our chairs, my backside sore from sitting on it for so long. I push my chair in and wave goodbye to everyone as they leave. When at last the room is empty of everyone except Lexa and me, I move over to the cart and rearrange the perilously stacked dishes, hoping they will survive the trip to the wash bucket. Footsteps draw my attention, and I glance around to find Lexa stacking maps together and placing scrolls on the walls shelf.

Lexa glances up from her work, “Are you nervous about our trip?”

I shuffle around the dish cart as I search for the words to answer her. “A little,” I admit and fiddle with the newly stacked plates. “I have spent my whole life in a cage. The notion I can go somewhere of my own free will is still new to me. Somehow it is exciting and terrifying all at the same time.”

Lexa nods as she places the last scroll on its respective shelf. She walks over to me and takes note of my perfectly stacked plates. She moves one over just enough, so it is no longer in a perfect line with the other dishes. I send her a scowl, but pride stops me from reaching out to fix it.

“We all feel unsettled at first. But every day the ability to make our own choices and decisions becomes easier,” Lexa says in a gentle, reassuring voice.

She takes the cart and pushes it to the door. Stopping she turns to me. “Come on Claire, let’s get these dishes done so we can get ready and rest before we leave. I doubt there will be much time to relax before this journey begins.”

She is right. I’m afraid I have already come accustomed to the joys of sleeping in a bed and regular helpings of food. I jog to catch up. Together we plod down the hall and enter the deserted mess hall. It is weird being in the room while it’s empty. The space seems bigger than it does during mealtimes.

We head for the wash bucket and begin to unload the dishes onto the table next to it. Lexa hauls a clay pot over near the orange crystal and sets it aside for heating. It doesn’t take long before the water is ready to use.

Doing the dishes is my least favorite part of freedom, and I quickly grow tired of it. I flash Lexa an evil grin and flick the dishwater at her. Little spots of water fall on her clothing and cling to her hair. A small water war is started, and we splash at each other. I slosh an impressive amount of liquid at Lexa and manage to put water all over the floor.

I cheer for myself and loudly proclaim my victory over the wash bucket. Our laughter echoes through the empty hall as we clean the water off the floor and finish off the dishes in what is left of the water.

I smile as I flop down beside the orange crystal and enjoy the warmth, my clothes beginning to steam themselves dry. I need a portable one of these. Lexa rummages through a shelf and returns with a small metal pot shaped with a handle and a spout. She fills it with water and a pinch of herbs from a leather pouch in her pocket. She settles the pot by the crystal on a small clay circle. Two clay cups are set beside me, and Lexa sits, wedging herself between me and the orange crystal.

We sit in silence for a moment, but I can't contain my curiosity, I point at the metal pot. "What is that for?"

Lexa shifts to rearrange the cups and her knee brushes mine. "It's a kettle. It boils a small amount of water, enough for two or three cups. The herbs I put in it add flavoring, it creates a type of drink."

I nod and eye the pot and the floating crushed up leaves. I make a mental note to learn more about edible plants, my knowledge seems woefully insufficient.

Lexa fidgets with a small stone in her hands, "Claire."

My eyes dart up to her tanned face and marvel at the way the orange glow plays with her jawline. "Mmm?"

"What are your thoughts on..." She stops and struggles with something internally, and she seems to deflate. "Would you like to try and use our necklaces again?"

My eyebrows furrow. I get the feeling that wasn't her original question. I look around the empty room. "I don't see why we can't."

Lexa holds out her hand for me to take, and I slowly place my hand on top of hers. My skin tingles at the contact. Light pours out around the neckline and sleeves of my armor. I use my free hand and tug my necklace free as a wall of light weaves its way around us. We are completely immersed in a bubble of light, and I can already feel the power of the necklace draining my energy.

Lexa's eyes meet mine. "Shall we see if we can stop it while we are connected?"

I nod and close my eyes, concentrating with all my will to stop the flow of energy. I open my eyes, and nothing has changed, the light still flows around us. I try again, and there is a flicker in the bubble, but that could just be a result of the pounding headache and exhaustion taking over me. Lexa seems to be having the same issue.

Sweat breaks across my brow. "I can't stop it."

Lexa's brow is furrowed in concentration and her eyes open at my words. The crystals have taken their toll on her too. Slowly we separate our hands and sit apart from each other. A loud whistle pierces the silence, and I am on my feet in seconds, my dagger half drawn.

Lexa smiles and tugs on my pant leg. "It's okay. It's just the kettle." She reaches over to the kettle and uses a nearby cloth to move it away from the crystal. The shrill whistle calms and fades.

Slowly I sink back to the ground, and Lexa busies herself with pouring the liquid into cups. She hands me one, and I take a sip. It's warm, slightly bitter and has a sweet after flavor. I feel my headache lighten almost immediately.

"I think we are going to need help," Lexa remarks as she stares into her tea.

I take another sip of mine. "Help?"

She nods. "With using these crystals. We can't set them off every time we make skin to skin contact, that's a recipe for disaster."

Ignoring the way my stomach lurches at the phrasing 'skin to skin', I stare into the orange crystal as if it will give me answers. "I see your point. Who can we ask without jeopardizing our mission?"

Lexa readjusts so she can lean against the warm bricks of the bench beside the crystal and pulls her knees up to her chest. She rests her cup upon her knees and looks up at me. "We could ask the elders. It is a little unorthodox, but I don't see another option."

I nod. "Will you be asking Eldri and Amder?"

Lexa raises a single eyebrow. "You know of them?"

I take another sip of my tea. "We had an encounter in the laundry room. Eldri insisted I clean my armor, and Amder gave me a new set of pants to wear."

Lexa smiles, "That sounds like them. They have their odd quirks. Yes, they are who I was considering asking, would you be open to working with them?"

I nod enthusiastically, and Lexa smiles, "I will see that it is arranged then."

We return to our tea and quickly finish it off. I help Lexa pack up and wash the pot before we reluctantly retreat from the warmth of the crystal.

We make our way back out into the corridor and head towards the sleeping quarter.

Lexa clears her throat, "There is a group gathering three days from now. We are celebrating the birthday of a boy named Samuel. He turns sixteen this week and as such becomes a man. So, there will be music, wrestling, and probably alcohol if Lucas is involved in any way. You should come. It is a good way to relax."

A smile spreads across my face. "A birthday party? I have never been to one before, I have only ever heard of them from old man Marwood who rambled most nights in my cell. Of course, I will come, it sounds exciting."

Lexa smiles. "Excellent."

"So, how old are you?" I ask and look at Lexa expectantly.

Lexa gives me a surprised face before schooling her features into a look that is more neutral. "You know Claire, in most cultures it's rude to come out and ask how old a person is."

"What's with the hesitation, are you secretly really old?" I prod, not giving up.

Lexa gives me a deadpan expression. "Well back in my day we used big sticks instead of swords as we didn't know how to make fire."

I keep my face just as serious as Lexa's. "Does that mean you're going to scold me about how incapable my generation is?"

"Perhaps after a nap. If you're lucky I might wave my cane about and everything," Lexa claims. Moving her arm about in demonstration of her cane waving abilities. Smiling, she bumps her hip into mine.

We walk in silence for a little longer before Lexa sighs and looks at me. "I have seen twenty-five winters this season."

I smile as we step through the doorway. "I have seen twenty-two summers."

We return to the makeshift sleeping room and pad through the rows of sleeping people as we make our way to our cots at the back of the room. I pull off my armor and find the blue lines have returned across my forearm. Hesitantly I touch them, and pain flares through my fingers and arm once more. Well, at least now I can be sure the pain wasn't related to my ripped stitches.

I flick my eyes over to Lexa who is already in her sleeping clothes. "Lexa, the lines are back."

Lexa puts down her half-folded clothing and comes over to inspect my arm. She reaches for it and stops, her hand hanging in mid-air. She pulls off her necklace, lays it on my cot and turns back to face me.

I find myself nodding. "Good idea."

Lexa gently takes my arm in her hand, "Yes. Well, my head hurts enough without going for a second round."

The throbbing behind my eyes agrees with her.

Lexa gently runs her finger along my arm and quickly draws it away when she encounters the lines there. "Well, that isn't a pleasant sensation. It is almost like it burns."

"That happens to me when I touch it too."

Lexa nods and lets my arm go, "It's strange. The gift has adverse effects on those who use it, but I have never seen this kind of response before."

I flick my eyes up to Lexa's. "Do you have any lines?"

Lexa holds out her arms and inspects them. "I don't think so."

I glance at my arm and back at Lexa, "Last time they were on your neck."

Lexa pauses for a moment and closes her eyes as she takes in a deep breath. Her eyes open and she ties her hair back with a strip of leather she keeps tied around her wrist. "Could you look for me?"

I nod, and Lexa carefully perches on the edge of my cot, far away from her necklace. I stand beside her and carefully turn her head to see her neck. Three green lines stand proudly where her hair had been resting moments before.

"You have them too." I pause a moment. "Do you want me to touch them and see if you have the same reaction?"

Lexa gives a single curt nod and swallows. Gently I reach out and touch one of the green lines. A shot of energy rushes through my fingertip

and up my arm. I yelp and pull my hand away.

Lexa jolts and takes in a sharp breath. Touching her lines caused a very different pain from the one I experienced upon contact with mine.

Lexa's chest rises and falls as she works to regain her breathing. "That was different."

I nod and rub my head, "Mine burns, and yours is like a shock of energy. That puts an end to the idea that our reactions to the crystals are the same."

Lexa gingerly touches her neck, and I see the moment the energy flows through her. She doesn't jolt, but her whole body tenses and her eyes clamp shut for a moment, she withdraws her hand and puts it in her lap, "It's like we are chasing our tails."

I nod and sit on the bed beside her. "Every time we answer one question, we're given another."

Lexa rubs her head. "It certainly feels that way."

I massage my temples. "I think I have had enough for tonight."

Lexa rises to her feet and carefully avoids me as she collects her necklace. "I concur. We should retire for the night in any case."

I crawl under my blankets and Lexa places a cloth over the light on the wall, bringing darkness into our small section of the room. Lexa's bed creaks as she climbs into it and gets comfortable. The noise settles, and quiet descends through the space.

I pull my blanket up to my chin. "Night, Lexa."

"Good night, Claire."

I smile, and the exhaustion flowing through me forces my eyes shut, and I slip into a deep sleep.

Chapter Twelve

I wake to Lexa gently shaking my shoulder. "Claire, wake up."

It feels far too soon to be coming into consciousness, and I stare blearily up at her. "What's wrong?"

Lexa moves away, collects my clothes from the pile on the floor, and hands them to me, "It is time to go seek the help of the elders."

I grumble and pull on my tunic. "Must we go seek them so early?"

Lexa raises her eyebrow to my comment. "If we wish to do it without drawing unnecessary attention to ourselves."

I pull on my leather pants and search the ground for my boots. One boot is by the bed, and after a few minutes of searching I find the other by one of the crates. One day I will learn to keep my clothes in a pile. Today is not that day.

Finally, I am dressed and follow Lexa through the lines of beds and out into the deserted hall.

I rub my eyes and stretch my arms out as Lexa leads me to a room and politely calls through the curtain, "Eldri. Amder. I have returned, and I have brought Claire with me."

The curtain is hurriedly pulled aside, and I am greeted by Eldri, "Come in, come in."

I walk into the room and find a mud brick table, chairs, and a long brick bench covered in cushions. In front of the seat sits a small empty table carved out of stone with some sort of cloth over it. To the side, is a small hearth with the smallest orange crystal I have encountered so far.

Amder sets a metal pot, like the one Lexa had used last night, beside the orange crystal and rises to his feet. "Claire it is good to see you again."

I smile at him, "You too. Thank you again for the pants."

He waves his hand. "I couldn't let you walk around in that tattered excuse for clothing any longer."

Eldri places four cups on the tablecloth and Lexa perches on the end of the cushioned bench, "I do not recall a heating crystal of that size."

Amder quickly looks away, but Eldri smiles at Lexa. "Dear, I am old, I don't want to walk all the way to the kitchens every time I want a cup of tea."

Lexa's eyes flick from Eldri to the crystal. "You made the crystal."

Eldri puffs up her chest and launches into a lecture. “I cannot just sit here while people take care of me, I have these gifts, and I will use them, whether or not you attempt to discourage me.”

Lexa doesn’t flinch at the woman’s tone, “Could you make more?”

The woman looks lost at Lexa’s words, and I see her lose her place in what must have been a practiced and well thought out speech.

Amder cuts in, “Pardon?”

Lexa looks at him, “If I provide you with crystals receptive to the gift, could you make more?”

Eldri and Amder nod dumbly.

“Would one month be sufficient for you to recover from using your skill in this way?”

Eldri glances at Amder who nods, “Yes.”

“Excellent, I will see that you are each provided with one crystal a month. Many people would be grateful to have a luxury such as this in their home.” Lexa gestures at the crystal as the kettle next to it starts to whistle.

I am ready for it this time, and it doesn’t scare me, but I still find myself cringing at the shrill sound.

Eldri’s eyes shine with happiness. “Thank you.”

Lexa nods, her face carefully impassive. Does she know how much her simple request means to them? Amder collects the kettle with a thick piece of hide and pours steaming tea into the cups, a small smile gracing his face.

I take my tea and quietly sip it. This one is different from the one I had shared with Lexa, it has more of a plant flavor than a bittersweet one.

I look over the elders. Can they help us understand the gems? They seem to have a sound understanding of how others work. Well, at least sufficient understanding to fill them with their own gift.

Eldri looks at me, “So, you have come here about a problem you have.”

My eyes widen. “Was I thinking loudly again?”

Amder chuckles and takes a seat beside Eldri on a stool. “You weren’t before, but you are now.”

Eldri sips her own tea, “We know dear, Lexa already spoke to us.”

My eyes dart to Lexa, who seems un-phased about their mind reading abilities. Lexa gives me a smile before she returns her gaze to the elders.

“I trust you can keep what I'm about to tell you between the two of you?”

Eldri and Amder nod and clutch their tea in their wrinkled hands.

Lexa takes a breath. “Claire and I are in possession of two gems of extraordinary power. They seem to activate upon the two of us making contact. We would like to learn to control this.”

Amder leans forward in his seat. “Could you show us what you mean by extraordinary abilities?”

Lexa looks at me questioningly. I pull my hand from my cup and hold it out for her to take. Lexa's warm hand settles in mine, and a rush of energy flows through me. Blue and green light emanates from our bodies and creates a bubble surrounding us.

Eldri and Amder gape at us. I throw a glance at Lexa and meet her gaze. Eldri sets aside her cup and approaches the bubble, she holds her hands above it, not quite touching, and closes her eyes. She drops them and shrugs at Amder. Amder sets aside his cup and joins her, the two of them link hands and try whatever Eldri attempted again.

I turn to Lexa. “What are they doing?”

Lexa shrugs. “I have no idea, but I don't know how much longer we should do this for.” She gestures at my arm, and I watch as a blue line comes up to the surface of my skin and breaks through it in a burning flash. The line shines as brightly as my necklace.

I glance at Lexa's neck and see the lines appearing there too. “We should let go. I suspect they will want us to do this a few times.”

Lexa nods and removes her hand. I miss its warmth and place my hand back around my cup as the light around us shimmers and fades.

The elders look entirely lost for words and for a few long moments they just look at us. Finally, it is Eldri that seems to find some words. “We couldn't sense you.”

Amder nods. “It is like you were gone. If we hadn't seen, you sitting there moments before I wouldn't have believed you were inside there.”

My eyebrows furrow. “You could see us though.”

Eldri shakes her head. “No. We could only see the light when it began and then you simply vanished.”

Amder collects his cup of tea. “Our gift sense of you vanished also. You were, by all accounts, invisible.”

Eldri hesitates for a moment but asks, “May we see your gems?”

I nod and take off mine. Lexa does the same, and we hand one each to the elders. They twist them in their lumpy fingers and close their eyes in concentration.

Amdar opens his eyes with a sigh, "The gift in this gem is more powerful than any individual I have ever encountered."

Eldri opens her eyes too. "I can feel the power but can't use it."

Lexa nods. "So far we have only been able to make them work when we touch."

The elders nod with Lexa's words and reach a hand towards each other, mimicking mine and Lexa's former actions. I watch, eager to see what the power looks like from the other side. I wait, but nothing happens. The elders are sweating profusely and let go of one another with a sharp cry.

Startled, Lexa and I are on our feet and approaching them in moments. We kneel beside the shocked elders and gently coax some tea into them. They seem to recover, and with shaking hands, they return our necklaces.

Confused, we retreat to our seat and wait for the elders to speak. Eldri drains her whole cup, and I rise to pour her another, she takes it gladly and speaks in a croaky voice, "That is not at all what I was expecting."

Amdar nods and sets his cup down with shaking hands, "When we tried to use the power inside the gems, an eye, unlike any I have ever seen, appeared in my vision."

Eldri nods eagerly. "Swirls of purples and silvers. The eye focused on us, the fury that emanated from it shot right to my core." Her words halt, and she struggles to go on.

Amdar fills us in, "The eye told us the power was not ours. We are not the true descendants and nor are we Keepers. It expelled us in a blinding flash of light, and we came back here."

I look at the necklace in my hand. "This purple eye spoke to you?"

The elders nod, their eyes wide. Eldri's voice wobbles out, "We did learn something. The gift in those necklaces is not the same as the gift we have. That gift is brighter, unfiltered."

Amdar nods. "It makes our gift seem like a shadow."

Eldri rubs her face. "And perhaps it is. There are many stories in our history that refer to the gift being more common and powerful. The most notable example is Taliah the Great."

“Who is Taliah the Great?” I ask.

The elders’ glance at each other and back at me. “The story is not common knowledge, often only passed down through gifted family lines,” Amder says slowly.

“Oh, pish posh!” snaps Eldri. “This secretive nonsense is what made people fear us to begin with.” She turns to us and smiles. “Taliah lived a long time ago. There is much debate about when, but it is generally agreed she lived eight hundred to one thousand years ago.”

“During the reigns of the siblings King Kent and Queen Chloe is how I was always told the story.” Amder interjects.

Eldri eyes him. “First you didn’t want to tell them and now you want to correct me?”

Amder clears his throat and quickly looks down at his cup.

Eldri smiles at us. “Taliah discovered her gift upon her eighteenth birthday and had to come to terms with it during a civil war created by a misguided and powerful gifted. The short story is that Taliah helped instate Kent and Chloe as reigning monarchs.”

“The siblings?” Lexa asked.

Eldri nodded. “They were chosen by the phoenix as the next true heirs of Katera. Theirs was a joint rule. Not a coupled rule, in fact Chloe and Taliah ended up married.”

“You are getting off track,” Amder cuts in.

Eldri waves her hand at him. “During this mission Taliah became the embodiment of the phoenix and is one of the most powerful gifted on record.”

“So, the power of the gift has reduced over time?” Lexa asks.

Eldri shrugs and Amder replies, “It is far more likely anyone with a notable skill in the gift are being killed and so only weaker lines, easier to hide lines, are being passed on.”

I glance at Lexa who stares at the necklace in her hand. What is she thinking?

I look at the elders. “Can you help us?”

Amder looks away, but Eldri meets my eyes, “I fear we can’t. But let’s try anyway.”

I loop my necklace around my neck. “What do I do?”

This seems to pull Lexa out of her thoughts and back to the situation. She pulls her necklace over her head and returns her focus to the elders.

Eldri takes a deep breath. “I will attempt to teach you to be more aware of your surroundings. I know you are both battle trained, but I mean awareness in a more spiritual sense.”

Amder takes over in his deep voice. “Close your eyes and even your breathing. You will feel the tiniest amounts of energy in everything around you.”

I do as he says, and even out my breathing. I search at the edge of my awareness for the energy he spoke of, but it eludes me. I sigh in frustration when I feel a faint tug in my consciousness. I go to it. A tiny spark of light rests there. It grows as I settle my gaze upon it. Soon I become aware of other flashes. It doesn’t take long for me to realize they are everywhere.

I keep my eyes closed and utter, “I see them.”

“Me too,” Lexa echoes.

“Feel the size of that energy, notice how everything at rest exhibits a similar amount of energy,” Eldri’s voice glosses over me.

Amder speaks gently, “Slowly take each other’s hand, and consciously try to dim the energy you are releasing.”

I reach for Lexa and find her hand. I am almost blinded by the light of the spark beside me as it roars into life, dimming everything around it. This spark must be Lexa’s. Faintly I register this was the first spark I noticed.

I become aware of the brightness of my own flame, and I work on quenching it. I try to remind it how small it usually is, but it refuses to obey me.

I open my eyes and find the dancing light around us, but now I am also aware of the roaring bonfire that is Lexa’s light. I reach for her light, and I help her dim it. Together we work on dimming mine. The dancing blue and green light around us wavers for a moment. Amder and Eldri clap excitedly, but Lexa’s spark flares back into life and mine follows suit. The bubble closes over us once more, and I don’t have the energy to quell the sparks again.

I release her hand and slump forward. Amder and Eldri rush toward us and help us to the floor. They rest us against the cushioned bench. Tea is brought to me, and I sip it gratefully. My arm is pulsing with pain, and I know if I look, I’ll find the lines have returned. I suspect after that usage there will be more than I have seen before. I peek at my arm and suppress

a groan when I see blue light bursting forth from lines covering my entire forearm.

Eldri carefully takes my arm and inspects it, before hurrying to look at Lexa's neck. "This isn't good."

I nod with a groan, "Yeah it hurts."

Eldri looks into my eyes. "It's not just that. This is a sign your bodies cannot contain the power of the gift within your necklaces."

"In essence it is leaking out when you use it," Amder adds.

I blink at them, but it is Lexa who speaks. "What will happen if we continue to use it?"

Eldri pauses. "It is possible your bodies could build up an immunity to it. But it is far more likely they will fail."

I wipe sweat from my brow. "They will fail? Like, the magic will stop working?"

Eldri rises to collect wet cloths and returns to pat them on our wounds. Mine steams and Lexa's releases a series of sparks. The wet cloth does a lot to soothe the pain in my arm.

Eldri sits back and swallows. "The gift contained in those necklaces will tear your bodies apart."

I look at my arm, "Oh."

Eldri looks over our weary faces. "You two need some rest."

Lexa protests, "I have much to do."

Eldri nods. "Yes, but you won't get much done in the state you are in."

Amder gently helps me to my feet. "Come. The room next to ours has been empty since... Well, it is empty, and you can sleep there."

Lexa climbs to her feet with assistance from Eldri, and together the four of us make it to the room next door. Amder pulls the sheet across the door to let us in, and gently leaves my side to shake the dust off the large bed.

Eldri guides Lexa and me towards it, and we crawl in. My head meets the pillow, and I know no more.

Chapter Thirteen

I awake and reach towards the space Lexa had occupied when I fell asleep only to find her gone, the space in the sheets beside me cold. I groan and rub my face as I drag myself out of bed and look around the small room with confusion. I recall what had brought me here and my eyes dart to my arm. The lines are gone. How long have I slept for?

Eldri bustles into the room with a teapot and cups. "Oh good, you are awake. I was starting to think I would have to wake you."

I watch the woman unload the pot onto a dusty table. "How long have I been asleep for?"

"Almost a day, and you seem better for it."

I nod and take the tea she offers me. "Thank you. A whole day," I mutter.

Eldri sits back on the bed Lexa had occupied. "It's not that unusual. Using the gift the first few times will exhaust you, but you will build up a resilience to it. It is like using any muscle, with use over time it will build up strength."

I look blankly at her.

Eldri sighs. "Think of it like when you first used a sword. I'm sure it was heavy, awkward, and it took time to be able to use it efficiently. Now you pick it up and don't even think about it."

I nod my head, that makes a lot of sense.

Eldri rearranges the sheets and blankets on the bed smoothing them out and tucking them in neatly. "The toll it takes on your physical body with those magical wounds. I have no idea if that will improve."

Well, that took an unwelcome turn. How am I supposed to use this against Emperor Darkmor if it is going to tear my body apart? I rub my face with my hand and let out a sigh.

Eldri peers at me. "It's okay dear. I'm sure those answers will come clear in time."

This time I am not even surprised she had read my thoughts. I am glad we can trust her.

Eldri nods, and we sit quietly for a time and sip our tea. I don't know what is in it, but energy returns to me after I have it. "Thank you for allowing us to stay. I should go find Lexa and help the injured."

Eldri nods. "Of course."

I rise to my feet and my necklace falls out of my shirt. I pull it off and tuck it into the secret pocket in my pants. I don't need that accidentally going off any time soon.

Eldri nods her approval and I wave goodbye as I exit the room, and head over to what I have dubbed 'the treatment room.'

Lewi eagerly greets me and we set about tending to people's wounds together. Lewi by this point is as accomplished as me when it comes to healing. But still, he always finds a way to work beside me, chatting the whole time about this and that. He is so mature, sometimes I forget he is only eight,

Every day people recover, and fewer people require treatment. Soon everyone will be able to return to their tasks, and they will have little use for me.

I spend my day there, doing my part to help the people who have helped me. The day passes quickly, and before I know it, Lexa taps me on the shoulder, ready to take me to the party. We exit the treatment room and walk through the halls. Lexa is quieter than usual.

I poke Lexa in the arm. "What's wrong?"

Lexa looks at me with a weary expression as we turn into the community dormitory. "There has been a problem with the security today. It has me a little preoccupied."

"What are we doing?" I ask as I follow Lexa through the rows of cots and over to her bed. "I thought we were going to the party?"

Lexa puts on her armor and collects her weapons. "We are. I am just collecting my armor and weapons as a precaution."

I watch Lexa collect her things. Her concern rubs off on me. I gather mine also. After all, it can't hurt and now that they are clean and mended, they are actually the nicest thing I own. I move over to my bed and spot the healing cream near my pillow. I must have forgotten to put it away. I collect it and stuff it into my pocket.

We head out the door and I touch Lexa's arm lightly. "How are you feeling?"

Lexa sends a small smile my way and my stomach flutters. "Better physically," she replies. "I do feel my mind will never quiet, it seems to feel the need to bring thoughts to the front of my mind about

circumstances I cannot change.” She sighs. “In some ways it is more exhausting than a day of battle.”

I fidget with my hands unsure how to respond to this confession. My mind whirls and I blurt, “I know how you feel. I am constantly assaulted by thoughts of Darkmor, how to free our people, how to use these damn necklaces. Most of all what will happen if I fail.”

Lexa stops and takes my hands in hers. “If we fail,” she corrects.

My eyes trace the lines of her face and settle on her emerald, green eyes. I swallow and the sound seems unbelievably loud.

Lexa flashes me a smile revealing straight white teeth, “You should also know I am too stubborn to fail.”

Laughter bubbles out unbidden and I smile for the first time today. “Well then, Darkmor doesn’t stand a chance.”

She squeezes my hands and lets them go. I feel them drop to my side and hang there as we stare silently at one another. Singing floats down the hall and breaks the moment. A clear female voice carries clear beautiful notes.

We walk to the party and soon the sound of music accompanies the voice. I speed up my pace, eager to reach the sounds of singing people. As we get closer clapping reaches my ears. I round the corner and get my first look at a party.

I take in the sight of people jumping as they dance with one another in the middle of the room. They are all doing the same movements, and I watch in fascination as they all sway together in time with the beat. A small group of people are creating the music near the back of the room. They use an array of implements. Two have many strings, another seems to be a skin stretched tightly over barrels, and the last appears to be a hollow stick of some sort.

Anne stands in the center singing, her voice is entrancing and flawless. Her song weaving with the sounds of the implements beside her. Together they make a truly wonderful sound.

Lexa and I stand for a moment watching her and the rest of the group. The song ends and we clap enthusiastically. Anne gives the crowd a small bow and steps away as the musical implements pick up a light and bouncy tune.

People surround Lexa, eager to greet their leader. I leave her to it and wander towards the dance floor so I can get a better view of the people

dancing to the music. I do my best to memorize the dance and work up the courage to join in.

A short woman approaches me with two cups in her grasp and hands one over to me. For a moment I don't recognize her. It takes a few seconds to realize the woman with the cups is Tash. She stands across from me, not wearing any of her belts. Without them, she looks so much smaller than what I had grown used to.

I smile. "Thanks, Tash."

She winks at me. "Drink up."

I take a large gulp from the cup in my hand. Big mistake. The drink is disgusting and burns the whole way down my throat. I try to control my face as it involuntarily scrunches up and I have to work hard to keep the drink from coming back up.

Tash laughs, takes a sip, and grimaces at the flavor. "Courtesy of Lucas. It does grow on you. Eventually. Or at least that's what I have been told."

I take another, much smaller, sip of my drink and valiantly try to keep my face straight as I swallow the horrendous liquid. My eye twitches against my will and the rest of my face follows suit in response to the offensive drink.

Tash laughs and claps me on the back as I choke on the sensation the drink leaves in my throat. Once I recover from the drink, I abandon it on a nearby table.

I turn to Tash, "Is Lexa the leader of this whole place?"

Tash nods. "Of course, isn't that obvious?"

"It's just—she is so young and there are many people here older than her." I finish lamely.

"No one here is more capable than Lexa," Tash states. "And in any case, she is the reason we are all here in one way or another." Tash waves her hands enthusiastically as she speaks. "She and her sister Anne discovered this place a few years back and one by one rescued those of us who managed to escape. The people who manage to get themselves out tend to be young adults."

I look at the younger families. "People got out with children?"

Tash shakes her head. "Most of them were born here. But recently Lexa has formed teams to liberate small groups of slaves as they are marched between compounds. It is tricky because it must look like an

animal attack or appear as if the group got lost. That is how we acquired some of our families and the elders.”

I glance back at Lexa, she truly is a marvelous woman.

“Enough shop talk,” Tash declares, dragging me out into the dance floor. Lucas is already in the middle with his glasses and floppy hair bouncing around with each step he takes. Together the two try to teach me the dance. After a few failed attempts I learn the dance moves and, for the most part, successfully join in.

The song comes to an end, and the crowd disperses. Melissa walks over to us and holds out two belts for Tash.

Tash gladly accepts them and straps them over her torso. “That’s so much better, thanks Mel.”

“Next time try not to break the buckles,” Melissa replies with a smirk, and snags a drink from a tray being passed around us.

Tash rolls her eyes. “Next time I’m hanging from a cliff face trying to fix our security systems, I’ll be sure to give my full attention to my belts and any rocks they may be hooked on.”

Melissa nods, dismissing Tash’s sarcasm and experimentally sniffs the cup in her hand. She decides it is safe and downs the whole drink in one swift movement. I watch Melissa intently and am disappointed when her face stays neutral. Perhaps Tash is right. Maybe it is possible to get used to the horrendous drink.

“Do you know if they got that finished?” Lucas asks, pulling my attention back to the conversation.

“They were still working on it when I left. We have guard patrols posted around the perimeter, so we should be okay,” Tash explains, shifting her feet. “I have a bad feeling about it though. We still don’t know why it failed.”

The comment sobers everyone’s mood.

I glance at Tash and clear my throat, “Where did you get those belts?”

“I found them in the storeroom of a house I rigged up with power. They were once used to hold ammunition for guns. That was before Emperor Darkmor destroyed every one he could get his hands on. Guns were the only weapon that gave us a fighting chance against his monsters,” Tash spits. “The number of times I could have taken him out if I just had one.”

The group nods. The music stops, and his friends drag a tall, young man with jet black hair out onto the dance floor. A group of people walks around handing out cups of the foul liquid to everyone around the room. I reluctantly take one. Lexa and Anne work their way over to us, both with cups in their hands. I eye the drinks warily. Everyone turns their attention to the young man and his friends.

A young blonde woman in a light purple dress addresses the crowd. “As you all probably know, we are here today to celebrate Samuel and the fact he has somehow managed to survive this long. It is a truly amazing feat. Anyone who is familiar with Samuel and his antics, knows this to be true.”

Laughter and cheers come from the crowd in response to the young woman’s remark. Samuel is pushed to stand beside her and the blush on his cheeks is now so dark I am sure you could fry an egg on it in less than two minutes.

The blonde woman holds her cup high. “To Samuel, congratulations on surviving sixteen winters! May there be many more to come!

“To Samuel,” echoes around the crowd and everyone takes a drink from the cup in their hands, prompting a round of scrunched up faces.

A loud explosion rocks the ground beneath our feet and dirt falls from the ceiling, landing on the heads and shoulders of the people around the room. Melissa and Tash cast accusing looks at Lucas as they brush the dirt from their shoulders.

Lucas holds up his hands. “Hey, I love a good explosion as much as the next person, but that wasn’t me.”

A single piercing scream emits from the hall outside the room, and a thundering crash forces people to hit the ground with their knees. Seconds later two men burst into the room, covered in dirt, sweat, and blood. They hold their weapons ready as they scan the party. Their eyes fall on Lexa, one of the few who managed to stay on their feet.

The man brandishes his bloodied sword. “Scarlet guards! They blew a hole in the roof! There is a whole army of them.”

Chaos erupts around us as everyone moves about in panic. Lexa doesn’t spare a second before she takes control and efficiently restores order to the chaos. Every available warrior is grouped together and ordered to fend off the invaders. A handful are assigned to protect the children and people who can’t fight. Lexa draws her sword, and the few that are armed

follow her lead. Everyone else is forced to find something from the room they can use as a weapon.

Anne turns to Lexa with wide eyes. "How did they find us?"

Nathanial throws me an accusing stare. I meet his gaze. I won't be blamed for this.

Lexa shakes her head. "I have no idea. We covered our tracks and Claire's too. There is no way they could have found us without help."

"I told you," Nathanial growls and throws a meaningful glance in my direction.

Lexa eyes him. "Do you mean to tell me you haven't had someone following Claire since the moment she came here? I told you not to, but I doubt you listened."

Nathanial shifts uncomfortably, "She has never been alone," he grumbles. "I have had someone watching her every minute."

I have been followed? Have I ever had a private moment while I have been here? My eyes flick to Lexa. How much do they know about the time we spent alone together?

Lexa takes a deep breath and grips the hilt of her sword until her knuckles whiten, "And did she ever have time to send a message as to our whereabouts?"

Nathanial looks at the ground and shakes his head. "No, Lexa, she hasn't."

Lexa lets out a huff. "Then leave it, Nathanial. I don't want to hear another accusation thrown at Claire, based solely on your dislike of her."

Samuel joins the line of fighters, a kitchen knife in his hand, and his presence puts an end to the conversation but does nothing to end the tension.

Oblivious to what he had just walked in on, Samuel asks, "Should we meet them in the hall?"

Lexa shakes her head and gives Samuel her attention. "Going into the hall will thin out our line. We will be easier to pick off. If we stay here, we force them to come in through the door one or two at a time. Then we can take out more of them."

An unsettling stillness falls over the room. It doesn't take a tactical mind to realize we are trapped. Battle cries can be heard on the other side of the curtain. It won't be long now. Another explosion rocks the room and

cracks spread across a wall. A small section about the size of my fist falls to the ground. Air whistles through it.

I nudge Lexa and point to the wall. “What’s on the other side of that?”

Lexa follows my finger, and her eyes widen. “The caverns!” She turns to face Nathaniel. “Cover that door! Stop them from getting in for as long as you can.”

Nathaniel stomps across the room and lifts the large and extremely rare wooden table, moving it towards the doorway. All the food falls to the floor as he attempts to balance the awkward object on his shoulder. The loud clattering of the stoneware on the floor snaps people out of their daze and they rush to help him. Soon he has the table blocking the entrance to the room and a small army of people holding it in place. Lexa sheaths her sword and moves over to the wall. She kicks at it, and the cracks spread. I go over to help her, and soon we have a small hole letting in air from the cavern.

I wipe sweat from my face as I haul rubble from the hole. “How long do you think they will survive out there?”

Lexa brings her eyes to meet mine. “Longer than they will if they stay in here.”

I can’t argue with that logic. Pounding at the table draws the room’s attention, and I watch as the people struggle to hold it in place. Families huddle together, and Lexa sends two armed men through the wall and quickly organizes everyone else to follow them. As people file out, others offer to stay back and fight, some refusing to leave. Lexa manages to persuade most of them to go and protect the others from the horrors of the cavern.

Many place their right hand over their chest as they pass Lexa and crawl through the hole into the danger of the cavern. Lexa returns the gesture to every person. Soon all the families have left, along with the elderly.

Amder and Eldri shuffle towards us. “Lexa,” Amder asks. “Is there anything I can say that will convince you to let us stay?”

Lexa gives him a small smile. “You know we must do everything we can to prevent Emperor Darkmor from getting his hands on the two of you.”

He bows his head. “Will you allow us to use our gifts to protect the families and children?”

Lexa clenches her jaw and nods once. “Hopefully it will not come to that.”

Eldri places her hand on Lexa’s forearm. “We have hoped for many things in our long lifetime. However, I learned that hoping isn’t always enough.”

Lexa shakes her head. “That is not an uplifting piece of wisdom.”

Ander crawls through the hole and Eldri pauses. “Sometimes a hurtful truth is more empowering than a comforting lie.” With that she starts to climb through the hole.

I grab her arm. “Wait. Can you and Ander use your gift to seal this hole?”

Eldri shakes her head thoughtfully. “We cannot seal it but-.”

Ander pops his head through the hole, “But we can make it look like there isn’t a hole there. Of course, it won’t stop the wind or anything passing through it.”

Lexa looks between the three of us, something akin to relief spreading across her defined features. “Do it.”

The Elders nod and with help squeeze back through the hole. Within moments the hole fills and looks like it was never there. Only the wind blowing occasionally through it gives any hint that something is amiss.

Lexa lets out a long sigh only a small group of people remain, and we begin herding them towards the gap in the wall. They eye the solid looking wall but trust us when we encourage them to go through. Soon only the people holding the table to the door and a few others are left.

Nathanial grunts and shifts over, taking most of the weight of the pounding guards on the other side. “Go!” He grunts.

People cast him a thankful glance and rush towards us and the gap in the wall. Another explosion rocks the room and a section of the roof caves in. Someone grabs my hand, and I am tugged backwards as a ton of rock falls where I had been moments before. Dust fills the room, and I can hear coughing and moaning. A few moments and the dust begins to settle, revealing a horror story of people who didn’t make it away from the falling rocks in time and a wall of rubble blocking our makeshift exit. There is a heavy silence as everyone realizes no one else will be leaving that way.

The moaning continues, it is coming from the pile of rubble. I rush forward and begin shifting rocks, a few others including Lexa rush to help. Our efforts reveal a twitching hand. I reach for it and clasp it. The hand holds mine back.

“They are alive.” I call out, my heart thumping in my chest.

Another explosion rocks the room, and more rocks fall from the ceiling. I tumble backwards and roll covering my head. My arms and back sting as I am pelted by rocks as they scatter everywhere. When the dust settles this time, the moaning and the hand are gone.

I stare at the space where the hand was and struggle to comprehend the large rocks now in its place.

Guards pound at the door and Lexa puts a hand on my shoulder. “You did what you could. Now we must help the living.”

I swallow and nod, a sickness building in my stomach.

With no other option, the remaining people prepare to hold the scarlet guards off for as long as possible. Hopefully we can distract them for long enough for the others to make it to safety. Before the guards realize, the rest of the rebel base is empty.

Lexa regroups the line, readying them for when the guards inevitably make it through the door. The pounding at the table blockade stops and silence settles over the room. A quiet hiss comes from the other side of the doorway.

Lucas’s eyes widen and he bellows, “Get away from the door!”

Spurred by the panic in Lucas’s voice everyone jumps away as it explodes back into the room. Splinters of wood fly around the area and embed themselves in walls and flesh. A sharp sting in my arm tells me I wasn’t spared by the projectile table.

I stumble backwards over a young man staring at the roof unblinking, a wooden projectile lodged in his neck.

Scarlet guards swarm the room, through the doorway they had widened with their explosives, each of them clad in full armor. These are not the scarlet guards I am used to seeing. These guards are fit and well trained with their weapons, very different from the ones who guard the docile slaves. We fly into battle and manage to take out the first wave without any further casualties. We don’t get time to celebrate as a second group swarms through the door, closely followed by a third. This group seems better prepared, and they take us out one by one.

I stab at my opponent and pull my sword from the guard in front of me, and he falls to his knees. Another takes his place before my opponent has taken his last breath. Lexa beside me fights off two attackers, her swords swinging in a graceful blur.

I can't do anything to help her as my new opponent swings a massive axe. I dodge and kick him in the stomach, then using the butt of my sword, I slam it into the back of his fist and knock his weapon from his hands. After that, he is quickly dispatched. I get a rare moment to look around the room. Our numbers have been reduced to less than twenty.

We are overwhelmed, and the waves of guards are endless, and each wave of guards are fresh and ready to fight. We on the other hand are tiring after fighting off wave after wave. My arms are heavy and the sword in my hand is slippery with sweat and blood.

Our only hope is that the others have long enough to make it to safety. Or at least far enough into the cavern that they aren't easily followed by the guards. That would make our sacrifice worth it. Another massive explosion rocks the room, and deep cracks form haphazardly across the roof as it threatens to repeat the rock fall only minutes ago.

Anne appears next to Lexa and pushes her back towards a small room, away from the swarming guards. I am collected by Tash who pulls me in the same direction.

Lexa looks about in confusion. "Anne what are you doing?"

Anne pushes Lexa to the back of the room with the help of Melissa and Tash. "Lexa you must go, there are too many. Your mission is too important. If you stay, they will kill you."

Anne pushes us into a small storeroom attached to the chamber that hosted the party. The room is filled with several sacks containing large red grains.

Lexa tries to dodge her sister as she blocks her from joining the fight. "Anne let me out! My people need me to fight, not to cower and run!" Lexa bellows.

Anne doesn't back down. "No Lexa. They need you to leave and go on the mission that will free them. The scarlet force is too big, and we are unprepared. Our only hope is the mission."

I glance back as Melissa and Lucas frantically pulling the sacks of grain away from the wall. An opening peeks out around the remaining

sacks of grain. Melissa pushes her fingers into a crack and together she, Tash, and Lucas pull the rock aside. A tunnel comes into view.

They knew this was here, why didn't they send the people out this way earlier? Lexa somehow manages to dart around her sister. She takes a single step out into the chaos and is scooped up by a giant man, who brings her back into the room.

Lexa huffs and growls, "Nathanial, put me down."

Nathanial ignores Lexa's demands and faces Anne. "Take the tunnel and go. Get her as far away from here as you can. Don't let her come back."

Nathanial nods and heads for the tunnel. As his massive frame moves forward, I gain a clear view of the other side of the doorway. I watch in horror as scarlet guards cut down the people around them. The people fight back, but most of them are using makeshift weapons, and the guards bring them down easily. Samuel and his friends light a wooden barrel. One that housed the alcohol Lucas made, and together they throw it at a group of scarlet guards. The explosion as the barrel hits the ground is so violent, people are thrown backward, and numerous fires start around the room.

Samuel and his friends take advantage of this and descend on the dazed guards, using kitchen knives from the buffet table and large shards of broken stoneware to stop them from rising. I call out as a guard comes up behind Samuel and swings his sword at the birthday boy. My voice is lost in the screams, and I can do nothing to help him.

The guard's sword meets the boy's flesh, just below the knee. It cuts his right leg clean from his body. Samuel falls to the ground and rolls, punching his knife through the gap in the guard's armor, slipping his blade easily between the man's stomach and his pants. The guard clutches his gut and falls with a cry.

Hands grasp my arms and drag me away from the awful scene. A scene I know will be burned into my memory for as long as I live. Lucas pulls me towards the tunnel.

I follow him, but my question bursts through my lips, "Why didn't we send everyone else this way?"

Lucas gives me a grim expression. "Because we wanted them to live."

I stare into the narrow tunnel. What is so bad that they didn't want to send anyone down here? I don't get long to think about it as Lucas forces

me into the narrow space. I have to enter sideways, but the tunnel behind the opening appears to be a little wider.

Nathanial is already in here, and it looks like it is taking all his effort to keep Lexa inside the tunnel. Melissa stands behind Nathanial thwarting Lexa's efforts to dart around him and return to the fight. Anne pushes Tash into the tunnel and removes one of the round balls from her belt.

A guard rushes into the room towards Anne. She draws her dagger and stabs him in the throat as he lifts his heavy mace over his head. The guard falls to the ground, clutching his throat, and his mace hits the ground next to him. The guard twitches for a moment before he stops moving altogether.

I look at Anne in amazement—that was more skill than I had expected. I shouldn't have been surprised. Lexa is her sister. More guards flow into the celebration room behind her. Their numbers are endless. Anne is right. No one will make it out alive. But the way Lucas had answered my question makes me suspect the way we are going doesn't hold much hope either. Anne squeezes the ball in her hand, and a blue light shines through her fingers.

“Anne. No!” Lexa cries, the battle forgotten as she desperately tries to get to her sister and the glowing ball in her hand.

Lexa's attempts at reaching her sister are so strong Lucas has to join the group holding her back. The three of them struggle to keep her in place.

Tash indicates to the glowing orb in Anne's hand. “Anne, you need to be far away by the time that turns red.”

“I have to make sure this entrance is destroyed. It will delay them following you. Go,” Anne states, making no indication she would be moving away before she completed her goal. The light in her hand turns purple, and it takes mere seconds to become red. Guards flow into the storeroom and approach Anne.

Anne ignores them and looks at Lexa. “I'm sorry.”

She throws the red ball to the ground, and the world around us explodes. Everything rattles and the explosion is deafening. My ears ring. Disoriented I stumble back into Lucas who is standing behind me. Small rocks pelt my face and arms as they rocket away from the explosion. Strong hands grip my forearms and shove me away from the explosion. It takes a moment for me to realize those hands belong to Melissa.

Rocks fall around us, effectively blocking the only way back. The only light in the tunnel comes from the remaining balls on Tash's belt. Their eery glow lighting up faces of the group in unfamiliar ways. I glance at Lexa. Tears run down her face as she runs to the pile of rocks that had been the entrance to the tunnel only moments earlier. She desperately pulls at the rocks attempting to dislodge them so she can get to the other side. My heart thuds in sympathy to her pain.

The narrow tunnel around us rumbles as Lexa manages to move a large rock from the top of the pile. Lexa freezes as she realizes bringing down the wall between her and her sister will collapse the tunnel. Nathaniel walks up to her and gently turns Lexa in the direction we need to go. Releasing his hold on her, he steps back, giving her much-needed space.

Lexa closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She takes one last glance at the collapsed opening and clenches her jaw. "Let's go." With that she runs down the tunnel, and everyone follows close in pursuit.

We run for a time in near darkness. My limbs are heavy and uncooperative as I stumble more than once. Finally, a small speck of light can be seen down the tunnel. An exit from the suffocating black draws near, giving me the motivation to keep my burning muscles moving. Light from the end of the tunnel grows steadily bigger with each step. Every ragged breath makes my lungs burn as if they are on fire. The light up ahead is unusual. It has a strange blue tinge to it.

A tough wire gate blocks our way out of the tunnel, and we slow as we approach it. Lexa looks at the lock for a moment and tugs it. The lock holds firm and clatters loudly around the tunnel. Lexa looks at the group "Tash?"

Tash moves forward, looks at the lock carefully for a minute and stuffs something into it. She pulls a rock from a pouch on more of her many belts and runs her knife along it. Sparks jump off the stone and towards the lock. Something fizzes for a moment and the smoldering lock pops open.

Lexa pulls the gate open, and it groans like it hasn't been moved in decades. Finally, we break free of the tunnel and stumble out of the exit, pausing for the first time since we started running to catch our breath. Once I have returned enough air to my lungs I examine the world around

me. Giant mushrooms completely surround us, taller than anything I have ever seen before.

As tall as they are, the thing about them that holds my attention is not the massive height, but that they all emit a soft blue light. The world around them glows. The mushroom forest somehow holds the inky darkness of the cavern at bay.

Caught up for a moment in the eerie beauty of the scenery around me, I almost forget what had brought us here. Almost.

I look around at the group of people surrounding me. Lucas and Tash stand in awe, staring up at the mushrooms around us. Melissa and Nathaniel seem to be having a competition to see who can look the least puffed out. Neither of them are doing a convincing job. Lexa stands off to the side, her cheeks flushed and streaked with dried tears. She wraps her arms around herself, and I fight the impulse to go over to her. Space is what she needs now.

Everyone's adrenaline dies off, and quiet settles amongst us. The very real feeling of pain settles on our shoulders as we all register that we left good people to die. Not that our staying would have really made a difference. Perhaps it would have prolonged it for a time. I sink to my knees and stare at the ground, my shoulders slump, and I bury my face in my hands. Trying to hide from the brutal memories that flash to the front of my mind.

My necklace falls forward and sparkles in the eerie glow of the mushrooms. It must have worked its way out of my shirt during the fighting. I grasp it.

This is why we left. This is what we fight for. This is the journey we were preparing for, and even though it had begun with a rocky start, we must see it to the end.

I climb to my feet and clear my throat. "Where do we go from here?"

The group turns to look at me. Their faces are a mixture of sadness, confusion, and disbelief over the events that have transpired. Their bloodied clothing and skin are testaments of the pain they carry in their hearts.

Lexa takes a deep breath and resumes command. "To Erast."

Chapter Fourteen

The group still struggling physically and emotionally nod. Lexa meets each of our eyes in turn and says, "Take five minutes, then we will move on."

We all drift apart as we each process the last few hours. I close my eyes, but the war cries and the groans of pain fill my ears. My eyes snap open and I look around at the group surrounding me, everyone in varying states of distress. I rub my face and a strong metallic smell fills my senses, I pull back my hands and take in my blood stained arms. I clench my jaw so hard my teeth hurt.

I have seen many people die in my lifetime, in fact, I had been the person to end many of them. But none have been quite this painful. I recall the young man dead on the ground impaled by a large shard of wood. Samuel staring at his severed leg after he had taken that guard down. A disembodied hand desperately gripping mine. My stomach twists painfully and threatens to bring that vial drink back up to accompany the flashes behind my eyes.

I suck in a long slow breath. We had to leave the people behind in the rebel camp, there is no way we could have saved them. We were lucky to save ourselves. The mission is too important for us to have perished in a battle where we were severely outnumbered and without a hope of winning.

I glance over to Lexa, her cheeks tinged red and her eyes glassy as she fights a battle between the woman who is our leader, and the woman who has just lost her sister. Anne was so close to that explosion when it went off. When shards of rock flew in every direction... I swallow, I am not sure someone could have survived that blast.

Lucas shuffles nearby and removes his glasses from his face, doing his best to clean the dust from them with his shirt, his blonde hair flops over his eyes as he smudges around the dust coating his spectacles. His eyes look surprisingly blue without the glasses.

Tash flops to the ground beside him and hugs her knees, her pant leg ripped and revealing the blood and dirt covered skin beneath, she stares out at the glowing mushroom forest. Tash looks so tiny in front of the

enormous fungus, if were in any other situation it would almost be comical.

The blue light of the mushroom sets an eerie glow for our situation. It adds a tinge of color to everything around us, from the tufts of a stubborn grass to the moss clinging on rocks around the clearing. Melissa is currently perched on one of these rocks ripping the moss from it in sharp angry tugs. Her black ringlets of hair cling to the sweat on her face as she takes a deep breath and begins checking her many knives, counting how many she had lost in the battle with the scarlet guards before we had been forced to retreat.

A shadow moves between me and the nearest mushroom as Nathaniel stomps past and inspects a wound on his right arm. His bulging muscles dwarf the size of the gash and make it seem better than it actually is.

I eye the cut. "That will need stitches."

Tash looks up in concern. "Do we even have anything to stitch with?"

I shrug. "At the very least it needs to be cleaned and something tied around it to keep the dirt out."

Material rips and I twist to see Melissa cutting a strip of fabric from her long shirt. She cuts it free and holds it out. "Here use this."

Tash pulls herself to her feet and takes the cloth. Slowly she approaches Nathaniel, who is trying to pick a stone from his bleeding gash. "Let me help."

Nathaniel lets out a big sigh and sits on the ground, so Tash can tend to his wound. Tash crouches beside him, and her nose crinkles as she gets her first up-close look at the gash and sets to work.

I turn away, I don't need to watch Tash pick stones from the cut on Nathaniel's arm. I have seen enough blood today. My eyes land on Lexa, standing apart from the group and rubbing her face with her hands.

I swallow. I had lost my mother suddenly when she hadn't returned from a review, I know all too well the pain Lexa is feeling right now. The uncertainty of what happened is in some ways worse than knowing. She had just left her people when they needed a leader most, and it is doubtful her sister survived that explosion or the resulting cave in.

I approach Lexa slowly, unsure if offering comfort would be welcome. I stand, close enough for her to be aware of my presence, but not so close Lexa felt like she had to speak to me.

Lexa drops her arms from her face and lets them hang limply by her sides, before meeting my gaze. She is barely keeping it together, her eyes shine with all the hurt and pain she would never say with words.

My stomach twists. I venture a little closer and reach out, pausing for a moment I take my necklace off and stuff it in my pocket before I reach out again and gently touch her arm. She looks at me, her green eyes sparkle with unshed tears. Almost pleading in her stare.

I gulp. I search for words, I could offer her comforting lies and promises, but she would see right through them. I can't bring myself to tell Lexa that her people and sister will be okay. Not when I don't believe it myself.

I move my hand down to hers and give it a gentle squeeze. "I am here."

A single tear runs down Lexa's cheek, and a small sob escapes her. Furiously she wipes her eyes, and I look away pretending I hadn't noticed. A few seconds pass, and I feel fingers lacing through mine and a return squeeze.

Lexa gives me a small, weak smile. "Thank you."

I turn back to the scattered and broken group. They look as lost as I feel. My heart clenches, all those people we left behind. I suppose I can add them to the growing toll of people I have failed to save.

Lexa clears her throat, lets go of my hand and steps over the loose dirt heading towards the center of the clearing, calling, "Let's gather together and figure out what we have before we move on."

Everyone shuffles towards us, checking their pockets and belts for things of use. A quick assessment of all the items reveals everyone is armed, Tash has four more explosive balls on her belt, Lucas has a second chunk of flint and I have the healing cream I had put in my pocket.

I hold it up to Nathaniel who shakes his head and gestures to his roughly bandaged arm. "This is just a scratch, save it for someone who needs it."

I nod at him and stuff the cream back into my pocket. "Not a great haul," I say.

Melissa lets out a small smile. "Our grand plans of packing." She shakes her head, and continues, "All that wasted time."

Lexa wipes her sword clean on the nearby moss. "I chose this team as everyone here is a highly capable warrior, skilled in a variety of fields and

quick to think on their feet. I am certain we will get by even without our packing.”

Melissa grins at Lexa.

Lucas rubs his head and lets out a small groan. “Did you plan for what would happen if we all left slightly drunk? Because I have lost all the buzz but still maintain all the fuzz.”

A small smile escapes me.

Lexa shakes her head and quirks her lip. “First thing is water. Once we find that, we will find somewhere to rest until your ‘fuzz’ has worn off.”

Tash turns to Melissa. “So, Mel. Any idea which way? If anyone can find water in this crazy land of glowing mushrooms, it will be you.”

Melissa strikes what is obviously meant to be a heroic pose and remarks in a deep, sophisticated voice, “I thought you would never ask.”

Apparently, not everyone has lost their buzz.

Tash offers Melissa a mock bow. “Lead the way, Oh mighty tracker.”

Satisfied with the amount of worship she has received, Melissa turns and struts down the slight hill.

With a sigh, everyone else trudges down the hill behind her. We wander through the giant mushrooms for a time, and I marvel at the beauty of the world around us. Well, in a kind of creepy but aesthetically pleasing sort of way.

I stare up in awe at the giant mushroom above me. Tiny holes pierce the stem and travel all the way along its length. A small white horned lizard pops out from one of the holes, skitters up the mushroom trunk, and slips into a new gap.

“Where are we?” I ask.

Lucas waves his hand at the mushrooms around us. “We are in Ethira.”

I glance around at the scenery and force back the images of Samuel losing his leg, as those pictures flash to the front of my mind. I swallow and stutter out, “That’s a pretty name.”

Nathanial lets out a gruff laugh. “It is called Ethira for ethereal, as in spirits.” He speaks each word slowly as if I were a child.

He doesn’t say any more. I stare at the back of his head as we wind our way around a large rock. Is he trying to be deliberately cryptic to get a rise from me?

We walk in silence for a few more paces until Lexa takes pity on me and fills in the blanks. “Most people believe this place to be haunted, and as such, tend to give it a wide berth.”

The group descends into an uncomfortable silence. Haunted? Like, by the dead? I glance up at the mushrooms, and the eerie blue light casts strange shadows amongst the short grass and rocks. Suddenly, the mushrooms don’t look quite so inviting.

I step into the middle of the path, putting as much distance between me and the mushrooms as possible. “Do you guys think this place is haunted?”

“Nah,” Lucas responds, waving his hand at the nearest mushroom. “The visions people see probably have something to do with a chemical released by the fungus.”

At his words, Tash quickly steps away from the mushroom she had been inspecting and wipes the hand she had almost touched it with on her pants.

I eye off the closest glowing fungi with distaste. “So, don’t lick the mushrooms. Got it.”

We trudge through the glowing mushroom forest for what feels like hours before Melissa finally stops at the edge of a river. As thirsty as she must be, she doesn’t stoop to take a drink. I stumble up to her and look down at the fast-flowing water, tiny sticks and particles float along the surface, swirling in the swift current, but that isn’t why I hesitate to drink.

The water glows a light, almost white, blue. The swirling liquids run along the banks lapping at the rocks and dirt along the edges, everything it comes into contact with, begins to glow.

A few large flat rocks make a pathway from one side of the river to the other, but the space between them was too far for any human to jump. I glance at Nathaniel, well any normal sized human.

Tash sighs and cautiously toes the edge of the water with her boot. She draws the shoe away, and the tip glows brightly. “Well, that sucks. Do you think there is any way to purify it?”

“Probably not,” comes Lucas’s swift reply but we can try digging a hole by the river side. With that Nathaniel takes two large steps from the edge of the river, pulls out his dagger and begins digging a fist sized hole.

I glance at Tash’s still glowing boot. “You have to admit though, the way it glows is kinda awesome.”

Nathanial suddenly stands as the hole he is digging starts to fill with glowing blue water. "This way won't work either," He grunts trying to shake the soft glow off the end of his dagger.

Tash grins at me and crouches beside the bank, carefully she pokes the tip of her knife into it. "Do you think if I drink this, I will get superpowers?"

Lucas peers into the water. "Far more likely you would mutate from ingesting whatever it is that makes the water glow."

Melissa snorts and strides over to colonize one of the flatter rocks beside the river. "Well, drink some and let us know when you find out."

Tash looks back at the water. Is she actually considering it? Melissa grins, and Tash looks up at her.

Lexa rubs her face with her hand. "No one is drinking the water." Then, to cement her statement, she gives Melissa and Tash a stern look.

Both women deflate at her words and mumble out something that sounds like a yes.

Satisfied with their response, Lexa glances around the small bank side clearing. "We should stop here and get some rest."

Nathanial looks around the small clearing and places his hands on his hips. "It is a little out in the open don't you think?"

Lexa considers his words. "It is as good a place as any, and as much as the mushrooms would offer cover for us, they would offer the same courtesy to anyone who wished us ill."

I peer into the mushroom trunks and stare into the eerie blue light. "Or any thing."

"And I don't want to risk touching a mushroom in my sleep," Tash adds in a hurry.

Lucas cheers up considerably at the thought of resting. "We should build a fire, I have seen plenty of dead bush scrub just a little back the way we came. A fire might be nice, the mushrooms should help hide the light from anyone who may be tracking us."

Melissa scoffs. "With the way I led us here, anyone following our trail will find themselves on a long and winding journey."

I rub my aching legs. "Do you mean we could have got here earlier?"

Melissa nods. "It seemed like a good idea to bring us the long way around, and if I am correct, this river comes from underground and anyone

following a direct path to it from the cave will find themselves on the opposite side of it.”

It was a good idea, but that doesn't mean I have to be happy about all the extra walking I forced my tired legs through. Lucas and Nathaniel pair up and head back the way we came, presumably to get some wood for the fire.

Tash looks about our small clearing. “I guess I will move some of these rocks, so we have somewhere to lay and build a fire.”

I nod and move to help her, just as we begin scouting the area for a good fire location, Melissa rolls her shoulders and announces, “I will see if I can find us anything to eat in this forsaken place.”

Without another word, she spins on her heel and stalks off into the glowing mushrooms around us.

“Should someone go with her?” I ask, watching Melissa disappear into the forest of fungus.

Lexa shakes her head. “Melissa is an extremely proficient hunter, if anyone were to go with her, they would likely scare away whatever she is hunting.”

Tash rolls a big rock away from our dedicated camp area and wipes her head. “And no one wants to be the reason Melissa's hunting expedition was ruined.”

I nod and collect some fist-sized rocks and put them in a pile. Lexa crouches beside me and gently stops my hand from adding to the circle of rocks I was building around the fireplace. “We cannot use those rocks to ring the fire, they are river rocks, and these wet rocks can explode when they get hot. Small shards can fly everywhere injuring people.

I glance down at the innocent looking rock in my hand. “I have never seen a rock explode, but I have never built a fire either, so I guess I will take your word for it.”

Lexa gives me a small smile. “It is okay, you will learn.”

The boys come back, arms laden with dead bushes that grow abundantly in between the mushrooms. Nathaniel is easily holding twice as much as Lucas who is currently peeping through the mound of twisted branches in his arms.

They drop the brushwood near our fireplace and set about breaking the dead bush into sizable pieces. I watch intently as they stack the branches, hoping to learn something.

They chose the two largest branches and lay them down parallel to one another before stacking another two slightly smaller branches on top, but in the opposite direction so it makes a square that rises from the ground. It's almost like they are building a stick fort.

Lucas catches me watching. "We stack it like this so plenty of air can get to the wood, it needs oxygen to burn well." He holds up a small stick. "Now grab some twigs like this for us, we will need it as kindling."

I nod, pull twigs off the dry bushes, and then collect what I can find around the clearing. Once my hands are full, Lucas drags me over to the fire and has me fill the middle of the stacked branches with the small twigs.

He points at the small twigs. "This is kindling, it will help spread the fire to the larger sticks."

Once this is done, he pulls two lumps of sharp rock from a pouch on his belt. "This is flint, it will create the spark that starts the fire, watch now, next time we need to light a fire you will be doing it."

I nod and try my best to pay attention to how he moves the rocks, but the action is so fast that I miss it. The kindling in the middle eagerly takes the flames, and they quickly consume the small twigs I had collected. Little sparks flit along the thicker branches and grow into leaping flames.

I sit back on my heels. "It never looked this hard when the guards did it."

Lucas lets out a small huff. "That's because their braziers are branches wrapped in cloth and soaked in oil and grease. It is effortless to light something covered in either."

I nod and stare into the flames, Lexa comes and settles down next to me just as Melissa marches back into the clearing, two fat furry creatures hanging from their tails in her hand.

She hands them to Lexa who inspects the creature. "This looks like some sort of river rat."

Melissa nods. "That's what I thought, even if they do have strangely glowing eyes, I figure they are edible."

Lexa pulls her knife from her belt, efficiently skins the creatures, and pulls out their innards before setting them on sticks placed over the fire. "It still seems like a better idea than drinking the water." She then wanders to the side of the clearing and begins to pull leaves of a nearby shrub and

wipes her hands clean dropping the soiled leaves in the pile with the innards.

Tash crawls to her feet. "I'll put this lot in the water, at least when things come to eat it there, it won't be anywhere near where we are sleeping."

I climb to my feet. "I will help."

Together we gather up the discarded animal parts and throw them into the water. Small vibrantly colored fish, about the size of my hand, dart up to the surface to fight over the scraps amongst the glowing liquid.

I watch a green and red neon-colored fish fight over the same section of intestine. Their sharp little teeth quickly tearing through the flesh and devouring it in moments. Their movements cause small waves of glowing water to crash against each other.

Tash and I gape at the river. I look up at her. "Okay, getting in the water is a last resort. I do not like how quickly those fish annihilated those scraps."

Tash gulps. "I second that notion."

Together we walk back to the crackling fire and squeeze in amongst our companions, the smell of the roasting river rats causing my stomach to rumble in chorus with the sizzling of the fat.

Tash leans back on her hands and stares at the fire. "So, the fish in the river have teeth and eat their food in packs, I think it might be worth avoiding the water where we can."

Lucas sits up eagerly. "The fish have teeth? Are you sure?"

Tash and I nod together.

Lucas lets out a grin and rubs his hands together. "Most unusual, perhaps I can rig up a line or net of some sort so I can have a closer look at these creatures."

I roll my eyes. "Only if you want them to chew through whatever it is you try to catch them with."

Lucas rubs his chin. "Well, that is a problem that will need solving. Perhaps a basket trap of some sort."

I eye the young man. Lucas seems to flip from crazy, genius, right now he has both feet planted firmly in the insane section. I mean, I suppose using baskets to catch the sharp toothed fish is a good idea, but trying to figure it out just so he can have a closer look at them strikes me as a little mad.

Lexa pokes the river rat with her knife, and a satisfied sigh climbs from her mouth. "Dinner is ready."

She sets about hacking chunks, and everyone spears a section with the tip of their knife. I sniff the meat tenderly, it seems okay, I have never eaten river rat before. Not that this creature looks anything like any rat I have ever seen, these creatures are much too fluffy, really the only thing they seem to have in common is the elongated snout.

We quickly work through the meat until only the bones are left. Lexa collects the bones with a sigh. "Too bad we didn't bring a pot, these skeletons would have made excellent broth for food tomorrow morning."

Nathanial gets up with a grunt and takes all the bones to the river, Lucas joins him, eager to see the fish Tash and I had described earlier.

I hold my hands to the fire and fight off the shiver that settles on me now that I am still. Tash and Melissa stretch out near the fire claiming the best spots by the leaping flames.

The boys return from their trip to the river, and the gleam in Lucas's eyes tells me everything I need to know about whether or not he encountered the fish I had spoken of earlier.

Lexa stretches and reclines against the large boulder behind her. "Get some rest, I will take first watch."

Nathanial plonks himself down on the ground and settles into a comfortable position. "Wake me for the second shift." He demands as he closes his eyes, and his breathing evens out almost immediately. Apparently, he can sleep anywhere.

I sigh and shift on the uncomfortable ground below me. What I would give to have that skill.

I lay with my back to the fire, even with Lexa watching I would rather see if anything is coming towards me. If being a slave taught me anything, it's how to sleep with one eye open.

I curl up, but flashes of the fight that had taken place in the rebel camp plague me. What is happening to everyone else wandering throughout the caverns, are they safe? Did Anne survive that blast? What if the guards have her? My stomach twists, I honestly don't know which option is worse.

My thoughts drift to my mother. I bite back a sob, another person I had failed to save. Inevitably this leads my thoughts to the medic who had

tried to heal me at the compound and the punishment she received for treating my wounds. People who attempt to help me don't do so well.

I sit up with a frustrated breath. Sleep isn't going to happen anytime soon. My eyes drift over to Lexa, she is perched against a rock and stares at the fire.

I pull myself to my feet and head over to Lexa. "Is it okay if I sit with you? I can't sleep."

Lexa looks up at me, her eyes slightly rimmed with red. She clears her throat. "Of course."

I settle beside her, and we sit quietly for a long time. I cast a sidelong glance at the woman beside me. I doubt she is feeling any better about what happened than I do. Had her thoughts traveled to unpleasant places the moment quiet had descended around us?

I gently nudge her. "It will get better with time. I know it doesn't feel like it now. But it will."

Lexa looks at me with wide eyes. "How do you know that?"

I shrug and offer her a weak smile. "It's something someone else told me."

Lexa lets out a small laugh and stares back at the flickering flames. Her shoulders are so tense that I worry she might snap if she moves too suddenly. Nothing I can say will make her feel better. I sigh and rest my head against the rock.

The mushroom above me is light blue with little white speckles running across the length of the stem. Following the stem, there are thin lines that span under the cup of the mushroom. Each of them is almost too white to look at and they run vertically across the underside of the fungus and highlight the navy-blue bottom. In their own weird way, these mushrooms are beautiful.

Lexa shifts beside me. "My brother died saving me too."

I tense and force myself to listen carefully, she is speaking so quietly I had almost missed her first sentence in the deafening silence around us. As if the smallest crackle of the fire would drown her voice out.

"We were running, but I was injured from a gladiator match and couldn't keep up with Jarmon and Anne. I was attacked from behind by a cerebi." Lexa pauses and brings her knees to her chest, hugging them close for security. Almost as if trying to protect herself from her own memories.

My eyes drift to Lexa's long-fingered hands and the way her knuckles are flushed white from the wringing she is subjecting them to.

A single tear runs down Lexa's cheek. "Jarmon heard my cries. After hiding Anne, he came back for me. He attacked the cerebi and took me to where he had hidden her."

I shift ever so slightly, afraid to interrupt Lexa.

Lexa takes in a shuddering breath. "He handed me the necklace and told me to take Anne and run as soon as it was safe. He distracted the cerebi so we could get away." She paused before continuing, her voice barely above a whisper, "The guards came and took what was left of him back to the compound."

My heart pounds in my chest in response to the pain in Lexa's strangled voice. Nothing I could do would take the pain away from the woman beside me, something twinges inside me. I find the realization deeply unsettling.

Lexa's frame softly rattles next to mine. "Anne and I watched as they hung him on the compound wall. He just hung there, his body broken and battered."

I shudder, remembering all too well the bodies displayed along the compound walls as a warning to others about what happens if you defy Darkmor. Those images coupled with the pain in Lexa's voice rips a hole in my heart.

Cautiously, I wipe tears from my own face, reluctant to let Lexa know how her story has affected me.

"That's when we began the rebel camp, it began as a small natural cave, and slowly we saved others, one by one increasing our numbers. Somehow, I became their default leader. But the rebellion is what Jarmon wanted. That, and for me to protect Anne." Lexa wipes her face and clenches her jaw. "I couldn't do either right. I failed them all. I feel so useless."

Slowly I slip my arm around Lexa's shoulder, she curls into my embrace and cries into my shoulder. "Don't think like that," I say. "You gave those people a safe place where they had a chance at a happy life. They might still be safe, making their way to another place. Lexa you gave them a chance when no one else would have."

I take a deep breath. "As for Anne, you did a fantastic job helping her grow into the woman she became. But she was her own person, an

amazingly brave person. A big part of that is because you were there for her.”

Lexa sniffles in my shoulder and clutches my side. “I feel like all I have done today is cry.”

A small smile spreads across my face. “If anybody asks, I’ll tell them it’s hormones. Anyone with enough sense will leave it be. They may even try to feed you.”

Lexa chuckles into my shoulder. “In the event food is given, I will be sure to share it with you.”

I smile, and we settle into a comfortable silence. I find I miss the tea we usually share in these moments. Lexa sits upright and begins throwing small rocks into the glowing river to the right of us.

Each little pebble sending brilliant bursts of white-blue water into the air.

It isn’t long before I join in, delighting in how the water splashes after each impact. The small game we are playing quickly becomes a competition to see who can cause the glowing water to splash the furthest up the large boulder on this side of the river.

I dig a fist-sized rock out of the ground and throw it at the water. It creates a spectacular splash and glowing liquid splays across the large boulder, leaving a long glowing stripe and a series of small speckles in its wake.

I let out a small bark of laughter, I had never had a chance to play games with other people my age. The thought of having to fight them to the death had always put a damper on any fun that might have been had.

A soft humming fills the space around us as the water stills. My laughter dies, and I shoot to my feet drawing my weapon, searching for the cause of the sound around us.

Lexa is on her feet beside me. “Can you see anything?”

I shake my head, and my companions stir and sit up.

A lizard skitters down from the tree and into a hole in the ground. River rats, I didn’t even know were nearby, flee through the dead, dry scrub around us, even the vibrant fish seem to retreat further into the water.

I furrow my brow.

Nathanial climbs to his feet and walks over to Lexa and me. “Well, that would account for the moaning people say comes from here.”

I tilt my head to the side and listen, and I can see how people could mistake that sound for moaning. The humming continues and shows no signs of stopping anytime soon.

Nathanial lowers himself to the ground. "Go on you two. I will watch from now on."

I struggle to re-sheath my sword and curse myself for only practicing drawing it, I would have to make time to learn how to do this later without looking incapable.

I cast one last look around. If this is normal, why did the creatures flee?

Lexa sheathes her sword in one fluid movement, and I swear she didn't even look at what she was doing. She casts a glance at Nathanial. "Remain vigilant, I am not comforted by the sound, it may explain the moaning, but it does not explain the reasons for it."

Nathanial nods. "As always."

Exhaustion creeps into my bones, even if there is something wrong, Nathanial is on watch. He will wake us if he suspects anything is amiss. Or at least, I hope he will. I glance at Lexa adding sticks to the fire and poking it to stir up the flames.

She trusts him, for now, that's enough.

I search the ground for a flat piece and plop down with a soft grunt.

Lexa raises her eyebrow. "Well, that was graceful."

I shrug. "What can I say, it comes naturally."

Lexa gives me a small smile and quietly settles down beside me.

I roll onto my right side and bring my arm up as a makeshift pillow. I relax for a few moments before I can no longer ignore the discomfort of my dagger pinned between me and the ground. The damn thing is digging into my leg.

Wriggling I struggle to untie it from my belt without getting up, after a lot of huffing I am successful in getting my belt to release the dagger into my custody.

Lexa casts me a disbelieving face. "That is simultaneously the most awkward and lazy thing I have ever seen somebody do."

I clutch my prize to my chest. "I think you mean glorious, because what I just did there was amazing."

Lexa's eyes twinkle, and a small smile creeps on to her face. "I just watched you roll around in the dirt trying to untie a dagger from your belt

instead of just sitting up to do it. Glorious and amazing are not the words I would use.”

I shrug and tuck my arm back under my head. “I guess you are entitled to your wrong opinion.”

Lexa flashes me a full-toothed grin and lays down beside me. “Goodnight Claire.”

“Night Lexa.” I chime back happily. My eyelids drop of their own accord, I force them open and glance over at Nathaniel. He sits on a large rock watching Tash thoughtfully.

Tash stirs, looks around and spots Nathaniel whose cheeks turn a light shade of pink. Tash moves towards him and settles back to sleep about an arm’s length away from where Nathaniel sits perched on a rock.

A small grin creeps on to my face, and after a time, I fall asleep to the humming of the mushrooms around me.

Chapter Fifteen

The world around me swirls with colors and faces that stream past my vision faster than I can identify them. I hold my head in my hands trying to prevent the rising nausea caused from the swirling images. Then everything stops and pictures slam into place. The sudden stop is almost as nauseating as the swirling had been.

Slowly, I take my head out of my hands and stare around at the hazy world I find myself in. I peer through it, but that does me as much good as trying to look through water, the image is distorted, and nothing seems to fix it.

Well, at least the rushing faces have stopped. I don't think my river rat would have tolerated it for much longer.

I lay my hand on my stomach, take a deep breath, and try to focus on the world around me once more, I can't get much detail out of my surrounding except that everything seems to be a hazy green.

Slowly the faint outline of tall yellow plants marks the clearing I am standing in, I stare at the blurry yellow bulbous trunks for a few moments before I notice a large campfire not far from me.

I creep over to the fire, my feet soundless in this strange new world. By the time I arrive at the flickering flames it has changed, and a large black pot hangs over it, secured by a peculiar metal tripod lashed together above the burning blaze.

I hold my hand out to the flames, but no warmth meets my hand. Curious, I step towards the pot and reach for the lid.

Rustling fabric makes my heart pound in my chest, I spin around and reach for my sword to find it is not there. Confused I look up and see a woman with long blonde hair and a light blue gown, rushing towards me. With every step the woman takes, her edges become more defined until she is the sharpest image inside the clearing.

I clear my throat. "Excuse me, where am I?"

The blonde ignores me as she hurries through the clearing, she doesn't even look over in my direction.

The blonde pauses in front of me, so close I could reach out and touch her. Now that she is closer, I can see her blue dress is covered in tiny white

dots that sway with her movements and create an almost hypnotizing sight. This dress must have taken many hours to make.

The blonde peers over my shoulder and apparently spots the thing she is looking for. “Carissa! Come quick!”

I spin on my heel and look back at the fire pit to discover an older woman crouching down beside the pot, casually stirring it with a large wooden spoon. Her red shirt stands out in stark contrast with the green fuzzy world around her, even with her blue overalls doing the best they can to mute the brightness of the red.

The woman by the pot glances towards us, her greying hair frames her lightly weathered face and around her mouth and eyes are lines of age and laughter.

The older woman, Carissa, rises to her feet and carefully places the lid back on the pot before turning to hurry towards the blonde who had called her.

Carissa moves so quickly I don’t get the chance to shift out of her way. I stumble back a few steps when the older woman strolls right through me, not even pausing as she follows the blonde woman a short distance away.

“What the-?” I exclaim clutching my stomach to check I am indeed still solid. “I must be dreaming.”

“It would seem they cannot see us.” Comes a voice from behind me.

I twist around, and my eyes come to rest on a familiar woman, slightly taller than myself. Her emerald, green eyes watching the interaction between the older woman and the blonde behind me.

“Lexa!” I huff. Of course, dream Lexa would get a kick out of scaring me. Apparently, my brain doesn’t think awake Lexa did enough of that.

“Claire.” Lexa acknowledged, bringing her gaze to rest on mine. “Any idea what is going on here?”

I shrug and turn to face the two women who hurry purposely towards a faded red caravan now swimming into view. Its’ edges and detail becoming more defined and sharpened with each passing second. It isn’t long before it stands out clearly against the faded green and white world around us.

I start towards the women and cast a glance back at Lexa. “Maybe we should follow them?”

I turn back and hear the faint tread of boots behind me, it would seem dream Lexa is just as curious as I am.

As we approach the caravan, I notice faded red patches of paint peeling all over it, revealing the aging timber beneath, on the front of the trailer is a large harness, flanked by huge, heavy poles.

I eye the strange leather contraptions and wonder what type of animal could be large enough to pull this thing.

My attention is drawn to a large poster pinned to the door of the caravan. The parchment is thick and yellowed, but otherwise shows no signs of weathering.

Lexa steps closer to the poster and reads the words out loud. "Come one, come all! Have your fortunes told by Madam Carissa and your mind read by Edward the Mysterious! Witness the incredible strength of Olaf the Strong and much more!"

My eyes drift down to the picture displayed under the writing. A redheaded man smiles up at us and wears a long purple coat covered in glittering scales. Around his neck is a purple gem twinkling in the light. I lift my hand to the necklace hidden under my shirt.

Lexa reaches out to touch the paper, her fingertips brushing the gem proudly displayed on the man's chest. "His necklace," she breathes.

Suddenly a loud voice rips through the air and spills through the open door of the caravan. "No! The guards have them!" A pause, "We need to help them!"

I glance at Lexa to make sure she has heard it too, and Lexa's face makes it abundantly clear that all the yelling was not a figment of my imagination.

A small smile creeps on to my lips as I recall that this is a dream and it is all, in fact, a figment of my imagination. I shake my head and decide just to go with it, I swiftly make my way to the entrance of the caravan and climb the two steps leading inside.

My nose is assaulted by the overpowering smell of some kind of plant currently burning on a plate resting on the counter to my left. My nose crinkles at the scent, and I step further into the small room so Lexa can follow me inside.

I watch with amusement as Lexa's nose wrinkles at the smell, and she casts an offended look at the burning plant in the corner.

Things are scattered haphazardly around the small space. Along the walls sacks are piled high and with bright materials, and flowers peek out through the gaps. Terracotta jars filled with growing plants are scattered throughout the room, resting on every relatively flat surface. A pile of brightly woven mats balances precariously on the top of a sack containing some kind of grain. So much stuff is crammed into this tiny space that it blocks my view of the back of the room.

Slowly, cautiously, I pick my way through the mess, heading towards the back of the van. I step over a sack of dirt and edge a little closer to the end.

How can any one person have all this stuff? I was excited just to have my own clothes, no wonder he needs a caravan, there is no way he would be able to carry all this on his own.

Lexa stumbles over something behind me and mutters a series of curse words.

I shoot Lexa a look of amusement. "And you said I fumble about."

Lexa's cheeks tinge red. "Are we not on a mission? Look to the front, there must be a reason why we are here." The color in Lexa's cheeks deepens as she carefully steps over a sack filled with string. "It is not like they can hear us anyway."

Smirking I edge around a pile of stacked rocks and spot a middle-aged redheaded man lying upon a small bed, writhing about as if he suffered from some terrible nightmare.

Carissa sits on the edge of the bed and wipes a wet cloth over his face, removing the trails of sweat and tears. The blonde woman stands in the corner, carrying a book and charcoal, scribbling away hurriedly every time the man utters a single word.

Lexa pushes her way into the cramped space and bumps into me, there is not enough room in this small room for all five of us to have personal space, so Lexa and I have to basically stand on each other's feet.

Lexa's green eyes take in the scene before us, she glances over the two women before her eyes come to rest on the man twisting in the bed where he lay.

"The man from the poster," She utters.

I nod, silently agreeing with Lexa's identification of the man who begins to roll around more vigorously than before.

His hands and legs thrash across the bed so violently that Carissa has to jump off to avoid the man's flailing arms.

Through gasping breaths, the man cries out, "No, leave the children alone! The barrel, light the barrel... Watch out! Behind you... he has a sword."

The man's face cringes. "Not the leg, poor boy. Some birthday."

My body stiffens, that description is oddly familiar. Had I not watched that exact scene take place just before we escaped the rebel camp?

I take in a breath and whisper, "No way."

Lexa glances at me in surprise.

"A tunnel, yes, use the tunnel!" The man screams. "What's in her hand? It's glowing blue." He pants, ripping at the sheets around him. "Purple," he whines. "Red."

Silence fills the room for a long moment, and everyone watches the man still.

"She destroyed the tunnel. Such a brave girl." Another pause.

Lexa grips my arm so tightly that it might break.

The man takes in a shuddering breath. "They are pulling her out of the rubble, and she is struggling to get free." Another pause. "Oooh." The man's face cringes. "I think she broke his nose, what a punch."

Lexa looks at me hopefully. "Do you think he is talking about Anne?"

I swallow. The man's recount does sound a lot like the events that took place at the rebel camp. "He could be," I venture carefully.

The tormented man's ranting becomes less coherent.

"They are digging... those girls... important... necklaces..." He whispers as he stirs back into semi-consciousness.

Suddenly he bolts upright, eyes wild and frightened. Gasping he twists in the bed and stares right at Lexa and me. My heart flies into my throat, I thought no one could see us.

I gulp and hold the redhead's gaze, noting his crazed brown eyes and sweat coated skin.

He waves his arms about and yells, "Run! They are coming! Run! NOW!"

I take a startled step back into the clutter behind me, and I bolt upright, Lexa miming the actions beside me. The cracking of the fire and our heavy breathing are the only sounds filling my ears.

Glowing mushrooms fill my surroundings once more, and the green clearing and people are gone. No caravan or cluttered belongings filled my vision.

My eyes dart around searching for the danger my heart is desperately trying to warn me about.

My eyes dash to Lexa's, and her shocked face tells me we had shared the same dream, the feeling of dread that had been floating about me settles firmly in my chest.

“Run? Lexa gasps looking around wildly. “Run from what?”

Chapter Sixteen

It takes me far too long to realize it's quiet. Too quiet. Where has the humming of the mushrooms gone? Without it, everything seems eerily quiet.

I look at Lexa. "It's quiet."

Lexa tilts her head to listen, but before she can reply Tash heaves herself up and turns towards us. "Are you two okay?" she asks in concern.

Nathanial rises from where he is sitting perched against the rock and peers around the perimeter.

Lexa collects her weapons and looks around. "We need to go," she announces as she climbs to her feet. "Now."

Everyone stirs and begins to clamber to their feet. Lucas rubs the sleep from his eyes. "What's going on?"

A troop of scarlet guards burst into the clearing across the river from us and look about wildly. One of them points at us, and the force begins heading this way.

Melissa slaps his leg with a smirk. "What did I tell you? Anyone tracking us would come out on the other side of the river."

The guards work their way out of the line of mushrooms, it is only a matter of time before they find a way across the river. One of the guards' points at me and slowly drags his finger across his own throat with a grin, the dirt smeared like war paint crinkles with his sick smile.

Unexpectedly, he is jerked back into the line of mushrooms, and a piercing scream fills the silence around us.

The screaming abruptly ends, and the stillness around us is once again filled with the humming of mushrooms. But this time the sound increases, rising an octave with every passing second, until the sound is so high pitched, I feel like my skull might burst.

It increases to the point where no other sounds can be heard over the screaming mushrooms. I struggle forward a few paces and cover my ears with my hands, but the horrific noise beats through my head as if I made no attempt to slow it.

The guards across the river are in a similar position to us, and many of them drop their weapons and clamp their hands over their ears.

Out of the mushrooms, pink wrinkled creatures emerge. Their hairless bodies quivering in anticipation as they circle the guards.

One guard stoops to grab his sword and slashes at the knee-high creature, the dog falls easily, its blood spilling onto the sandy soil, but it is quickly replaced by two more. Their long saber teeth glint with the light of the mushrooms around them as they circle their outnumbered prey.

I stare in horror at the wrinkled beasts, their tails are what really holds your attention. Evolution truly weaponized these beasts, or perhaps this was the work of magic? Their long thick tails boast a massive, spiked club that swings menacingly from side to side.

The creatures single out a target and launch at the guard, using their tails with surprising efficiency, the guard is reduced to a red pile of mush within moments.

The beasts dive upon the body, fighting one another for a mouthful. Splatters of flesh and blood fly everywhere. Even from here it isn't a pleasant sight.

One of the dead guard's comrades raises his sword and charges at the animals, but the sound of the screaming mushrooms dulls them.

I look away from the gruesome carnage and stagger towards Lexa. I don't make it very far before something drips onto my sleeve. I pause and consider the red droplet on my clothing, slowly I raise my hand to my nose, and it comes away scarlet.

I glance up at Lexa and find her nose is bleeding. A quick look around tells me everyone is in the same position. A flash of pain bursts through my head, and I double over, trying desperately to even out my breathing. But the screaming mushrooms make it impossible to relax.

Lexa points at the group, she is yelling something, but the roaring of the mushrooms drowns out everything else. Slowly a trickle of blood crawls out of Lexa's right ear.

This noise is going to kill us.

I glance back at the dogs tearing through the remaining guards with ease. That's if they don't get us first.

The dogs rip through the remaining scarlet guards as they try to flee, the men fall, their blood creating a pool around their still thrashing bodies, their mouths move in pained silent cries. The roaring of the mushrooms leaves no room for any other kind of noise.

I stagger, and it takes an unbelievable amount of effort to pull my sword from my scabbard, my shaking hands proving to be of little assistance. My head throbs with almost unbearable pain and my vision begins to darken.

I had been through worse than this, I am not going to be beaten by a sound. I wipe the sweat from my eyes with the back of my hand. I stumble towards the fire, Lexa following close beside me the tip of her sword dragging in the dirt as she struggles through every step.

Our group meets us, their faces stark white against the crimson blood streaming from their nose and ears.

My lungs tighten impossibly further, and I struggle to bring air into my body, each of my efforts leads to the smallest reward of oxygen.

Tash falls to her knees, and Lucas follows her sprawling in the dirt far too close to the fire. Nathaniel stoops to Tash, but the sound defeats him as he slumps beside her. Melissa is the last of them to crumple to the ground as her body finally gives up.

I stuff my hand into my pocket and pull out my necklace, but black spots float across my vision, and my knees begin to buckle. It is almost as if I am falling in slow motion. A tug on my hand as I fall brings my attention to the right. Lexa has taken hold of it.

The moment we hit the dirt, light bursts from our necklaces and a shifting bubble forms around us. Mercifully the sound stops. But the roaring of the mushrooms is replaced by a deafening ringing in my ears.

The pounding in my head lessens, and I can think a little. Lexa tugs my hand, and together we crawl to the other side of the fire where our companions lay writhing in pain.

I recall the rock fall in the rebel camp, and I am unsure if we will be able to get them in our bubble, the rocks that fell had merely landed on top. But maybe we could form the bubble with them already inside?

I squeeze Lexa's hand and point at our companions. I try to speak but the words are soundless to my own ears, and Lexa just tilts her head in my direction.

I sigh and take a deep breath, preparing myself for what I know I must do. I let go of Lexa's hand, and the roaring of the mushrooms comes back, worse than before. It is as if the temporary silence had amplified it. I force myself to pull my hands from my ears and crawl to the other side of

our fallen rebels. Now on the other side I hold out my sweaty dust covered hand to Lexa.

Lexa struggles towards me and her clammy hand claps onto mine. The light bubble returns enveloping us, our companions and part of the fire. I let out a sigh of relief as the pounding in my ears replaces the sound of the mushrooms.

I close my eyes and focus on bringing air into my lungs. That was too close. I don't think we would have lasted more than a few more minutes with that sound. I awkwardly sling my necklace around my neck with one hand.

With my now free hand, I clap my palm to my thigh. Nothing. No sound at all.

Panic rises within me, and my throat constricts as if I am being strangled. No. No. Please don't be deaf. There is no way I will survive this world without my hearing.

I slap my hand against my thigh again, desperate to hear anything. Pain sparks through my leg, but not a single sound reaches my ears. Tears sting the back of my eyes.

I blink furiously. No Claire keep it together, we need to get out of here, and then you can mourn the loss of your hearing.

I look around at the group, they look as bad as I do. I whimper as painful ringing fills my ears and a smile creeps onto my face. A sound. I am going to take this as a positive sign.

Tash and Nathaniel begin to stir, carefully Nathaniel inspects Tash's head, fussing over the drying blood near her ears and nose.

I glance across the river at the dogs, they have already devoured most of the guards, and already they are looking for a way across the river.

The lead dog eyes the flat rocks that make a pathway from one side to the other. They are too far for a human to jump, but I wouldn't be surprised if these beasts could do it.

It cocks its head as its red muzzle drips blood onto the dirt between its front paws. It backs up and makes the leap. I hold my breath.

Both its bloodied paws land solidly on the rock, and it prepares itself for the next leap.

Grief falls in my stomach like a stone. We can't fight them in this state. Seasoned guards in full body armor couldn't fight off these dogs once the debilitating sound of the mushrooms reached their ears.

Other dogs begin making the leap. A dog doesn't quite make it and its hind legs slip into the water, it struggles violently to get out, but swarms of vibrant fish attach it from every angle. Soon it is pulled under and only a floating red puddle in the middle of a glowing blue river remains. The other pink things are now nervous but one with a leather purse bag clamped between its jaws, struggles with the first jump, its paw slipping into the water behind it. It rights its self and proceeds across the river with the first. The others regain their courage and soon they are all on our side of the river.

The dogs, about twenty in all, begin circling the ground where we lay sleeping not even an hour ago. It would seem they cannot see us, but they can find the scent we left behind.

Lucas rubs his head and wipes his face as he returns to consciousness. He visibly starts when he sees the pink wrinkled creatures surrounding us. He flails his arms about and points wildly, saying words I cannot hear.

Had our situation been less dire, his silent performance would have been hysterical.

Melissa gives him a shove and a look that says 'shut up' clearer than any words could have.

The nearest bloodied dog turns its long snout in our direction and begins sniffing the ground vigorously. It trots towards us, leaving bloodied footsteps on the ground with every pace it takes.

Other pink creatures converge with the first, eagerly sniffing around our bubble, one gets too close, and its nose makes contact with the light. The bubble flashes green, and the beast leaps back with its hackles raised, beating the ground with its club-like tail.

The ground beneath me vibrates with the force of its blows.

Pain sears through my arm and lines appear along the underside of my forearm. Sapphire light bursts through the cuts and fills the bubble with a strange blue hue.

The hand in mine tightens, and I glance at Lexa, the lines on her neck are pouring green light like an unchecked fire.

Another dog touches the bubble, and it flashes green again. Another line appears on Lexa's neck. I glance at mine, I didn't get a new wound.

Don't get me wrong, my magic wounds are appearing steadily, but Lexa's seem to coincide with the green flash of the bubble.

Another dog throws itself at the bubble, again it flashes green and yet another line appears on Lexa, this time across the back of the hand holding mine.

I look around desperately. There must be something we can do, fighting these creatures can't happen in our state. I hate to think what would happen if we drop the light and the noise is still going.

My eyes land on a faintly glowing rock about the size of my fist, sitting inside the bubble. A river rock. My eyes dart to the fire. That could work.

With my spare hand, I reach for the smooth rock and chuck it in the fire.

Lexa looks at me in alarm. "Claire they could explode!"

The words are so faint I almost miss them, tears sting my eyes. I'm not deaf, my hearing is returning.

I shake my head and look at Lexa, I shout back, "I am counting on it. If we put enough of them in the fire and let go long enough to move away, they might explode near the dogs."

My throat feels raw, but I do my best to keep the sound high, even with my raised voice my words had been barely audible.

Lexa's eyebrows lift in surprise, and she immediately sets about throwing little river rocks into the fire. I don't know how long it will take to heat these rocks enough, but with the size they are, my gut feeling tells me it won't be long before they start exploding.

Nathanial adds dried twigs from the dirt around us to the part of the fire within our bubble.

The bubble flashes green again, and Lexa cries out as a long green line emerges from her wrist to her elbow. The light that seeps from it is far brighter than any I have seen so far. My own arms have filled with tiny little lines. Honestly, it looks like I have rolled in barbed wire fencing and instead of blood I have oozing blue light.

Lexa looks at the group. "Everyone get ready to move in three, two, one."

I let go of Lexa's hand, and the group moves as one away from the fire. The pink wrinkled dogs start in surprise as we suddenly appear and raise their hackles in alarm. The roaring mushrooms fill my ears once more, and I clamp my hands firmly over my head.

As soon as the fire is well outside our range, I retake Lexa's hand, and our light bubble re-emerges. My body screams in protest as it once again takes the abuse of the magic from my necklace.

The rocks we put into the fire begin to pop, and shards of stone fly everywhere creating mayhem amongst the dogs. The largest rock bursts and its shards kill at least four of them, the largest one that crossed the river first and the one with the leather purse among them.

The other dogs skitter about and flee into the cover of the mushrooms. A few other rocks go off in the empty campsite. Hopefully, that will drive the beasts further away.

I look at Lexa and release her hand. The light drops and the two of us fall to our knees. Mercifully, the roaring of the mushrooms has ceased. Maybe the exploding rocks scared it too?

Nathanial quickly builds up the fire with all the remaining wood we have and collects a pile of river rocks, putting them well within reach in case we need another trick like that again.

Tash looks at the glowing lines all over our bodies in alarm. "What is happening?" She gently takes Lexa's arm and the way Lexa's face twists in pain makes my heart go out to her. Tash looks stricken. "How do I treat this?"

Melissa looks at us curiosity burning in her eyes. "That was magic. I knew it had consequences but this..."

I struggle to remove my necklace, and I stuff it into the pocket in my pants. I won't be using that any time soon, I don't think I would survive it.

I pull the healing cream from my pocket, and I crawl over to Lexa. With shaking hands, I unscrew the lid, take a scoop of the purple paste and apply it to the wounds on her neck. Lexa's sigh of relief is all I need to know, I set about treating each and every one of her glowing lines.

Lucas crawls over to the nearest dog and inspects it. "This is the strangest creature I have ever seen." He pokes at its pink furless folds. "It has no ears."

"What?" Melissa grumps as she does her best to collect our meager belongings from around the camp.

Lucas turns to face us. "They have no ears, that's why the sound didn't affect them."

I apply a strip of cream to the extended glowing cut on Lexa's forearm. "Well, that explains something."

Lucas sits back on his heels. "Yes, but that doesn't explain why we can hear. We were exposed to that sound for far too long, we should have been deaf for at least a day or two, that's if we ever recovered our hearing."

Melissa frowns and looks at us. "Maybe it has something to do with what you two did?"

I shrug. "We don't really understand what happens when we use the magic."

Lexa takes the cream from me. Gently she begins smearing cream across the broken skin on my hands and arms. The relief is immediate. I don't know what we will do when we run out of cream, thankfully it spreads easy, we should get another three or four runs out of it. But I would rather not test my estimation.

Nathanial glances back at us. "As soon as you two can move, we should go. Those dogs will be back."

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose. "How do you know?"

Nathanial shrugs. "It's what I'd do. I can't see those mutts being defeated by their prey often."

Tash nods and retrieves the swords from where Lexa and I had dropped them, carefully she sheaths them for us. "I can't see you two being able to use them just yet, but sometimes it is a comfort just to have them."

I give her a smile. "Thanks, Tash."

Melissa moves over to the dog with the leather pouch still firmly lodged in its muzzle. With difficulty, she pries it loose and brings it over to the group. Carefully she upends the bag on the dirt between us.

Out of it rolls coins, ten gold, four silver. Three small white crystals about the size of my thumb tumble out with them and finally a piece of dried and folded hide.

Carefully Melissa extracts the hide and unfolds it. Her eyes widen as she reads the words on the page and she flicks her eyes at me.

"Well," says Lucas. "What is it?"

Melissa clears her throat. "Our informants say Gladiator 1408, is located in the tunnels northeast from here, within the mountains. Take a troop of heavily armed men, expect to encounter rebels. Return 1408 alive for lineage testing. Capture as many rebels as you can and relocate them to tunnel digging. The wishes of Lord Darkmor."

My heart twists, they destroyed the rebel camp because they were looking for me.

Nathanial's face twists in rage. "So, we were betrayed! Who is 1408 and why does Darkmor want her so badly?"

I look at my feet. "I am Gladiator 1408." The silence that greets me is so thick I almost miss the mushrooms. "I don't know why he wants me, he took my mother the night I left and until now I didn't know why he took her." I grip and release my hands. "I don't know what could be so important about my lineage worth killing over."

Lexa places her hand in mine and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Well, whatever it is I am sure we will find out."

Melissa returns all the items to the purse and straps it to her belt. "Are you two okay to move? We are too exposed like this and judging from the state you two are in, I am guessing your magic light trick won't work again."

Lexa nods and climbs to her feet, her hand slipping from mine in the movement. I struggle to my feet beside her exhaustion screaming at me to rest. "Okay, let's find a way out of the land of glowing fungus."

Chapter Seventeen

We trek through the mushrooms, winding our way this way and that, ever conscious of the beasts that could be stalking us, lurking just out of sight.

My sword bumps annoyingly against my thigh with every step I take. Thump, thump, thump. I sigh, my leg is starting to get sore from the constant touching, how long does it take to get used to this?

I look in front at Lexa who walks with her hand on the hilt of her sword. I mimic the gesture and find instant relief from the tapping on my thigh. I roll my neck, and the muscles there twinge exhausted beyond reason.

Something flashes past the corner of my eye. I twist to peer into the mushrooms, the only thing I see is giant glowing fungus and the occasional rock and dried bush.

“We are being followed.” Lexa murmurs in a low voice.

Lucas twitches in front of me. “Why couldn’t they just leave us be?”

“What do we do?” Tash asks, trying to mirror Lexa’s calm.

Lexa grips the hilt of her sword. “Keep walking. What happened at the fire might keep them away but be prepared.”

We walk this way for another couple of yards, but the dogs become bolder. I start seeing them clearly instead of the possible glimpse I had earlier. Pink flesh shows vividly between the mushrooms, it isn’t excellent camouflage.

I clear my throat. “I don’t think the mutant dogs are going to let us just walk away.”

Nathanial grips his giant sword. “I told you they would come back.”

Melissa spins on the spot and resumes walking. “I count eighteen.”

“There are six of us.” Lucas chimes in.

“Two of which barely have the strength to walk.” Nathanial scoffs.

Tash casts a nervous look. “And those are just the ones we can see.”

I glance at the rushing water beside us. Tash and I lock eyes at the same moment. “Last resort?” we say in unison.

Lexa raises her eyebrow and casts us a look.

I nod to the water. “We could get in, with the flesh-eating fish. Maybe they will eat the blood covered mutant dogs over us?”

Lexa eyes the glowing river beside us. “That will only work if the dogs get in the water too. It is likely they are more aware of its danger than we are.”

Lucas fidgets with a bag on his belt. “Yeah, the Jigglers live here full time, we are just visiting.”

“Jigglers?” Melissa enquires.

Lucas nods. “The mutant dog things, they jiggle as they walk. I thought a funny name would make them less horrifying.”

I look out at one of the pursuing dogs, and the pink wrinkled skin does indeed jiggle with every step the beast takes. My nose crinkles and I look away. Now that I have noticed the jiggling, I will never be able to un-see it, the image is now burned into my mind forever.

I shake my head as if that will somehow dislodge the image making a home in there. A strange yapping fills the air, and one of the dogs charge at us.

Nathanial steps forward and efficiently cuts the dog down in mid-air, his massive sword cutting the beast in half. The two parts land with a thud and blood runs down into the water beside us, standing out vividly in the glowing river around it.

My body tenses, waiting for the screaming of the mushrooms to return like it did the last time the dogs made an attack. But no roaring of wailing vegetation reaches my ears. I don’t get time to ponder why when a group of dogs charge us, apparently smarter than the first. One could be taken down quickly, but as a group they outnumber us.

Adrenalin beats in my veins as my body registers the life-or-death situation, and with energy I could not have found only minutes ago I pull my sword from its scabbard as the group reaches us and we fly into battle. A large dog swings its clubbed tail at me, and I dodge it, Lexa steps in and slices through the attacking limb, the green magic wounds framing her well-muscled arms. The club tail lands on the ground with a thud and slowly rolls towards the river.

A dog leaps over its mangled companion only to have a knife buried deep in its skull. I glance at Melissa who quickly pulls another knife and begins searching for her next target.

I swing my sword at a nearby dog and cut through its paw as it swipes at me, its long saber teeth bared in a vicious snarl. Tash leaps on its back and buries her dagger deep between the shoulder blades of the mutant dog.

A small explosion causes my ears to ring, and I turn to find Lucas pulling small grey beads from the pouch on his belt and throwing them at the dogs around him with deadly accuracy. These beads explode on impact creating a surprising amount of damage. Chunks of unfortunate dogs fly everywhere.

Lucas grabs another handful of beads and throws them at the dogs around him. “Bad Jigglers! No!

Fairly certain Lucas has his situation under control, I return my attention to the two dogs advancing on me. I take a deep breath. I have been hurt worse than this in a gladiator fight and still won.

I step in close to the first dog and slash my blade through its tail as it swings at me, the weaponized rear comes off and sails into the water behind me. The second dog pounces, I crouch and bury my sword in its stomach as it flies above me. Quickly, I pull my sword out of the sill airborne dog and listen to the loud splash as it lands.

Lexa draws her second short sword and takes on three dogs at once, expertly wielding her weapons in a blur of motion. The dogs around her fall but more replace them, I realize with a jolt they are slowly working on separating her from our group. Even now the dogs are managing to sneak around and encircle her.

Had Lexa not been weakened by the use of magic I am sure she could have kept the beasts at bay with her dancing swords. But I can see the fatigue setting in, Lexa stumbles and one of the dogs dart in, she dispatches it quickly, but it is obvious to me, and them that more mistakes will happen.

I make my way over to Lexa, hacking my way through dogs so intent on their prey that they don’t hear my approach.

“Lexa,” I yell blowing my cover and bringing the dog’s attention to me. “They are trying to separate you!”

Lexa looks up in alarm and takes in the gap the dogs have forced between her and the rest of the group and redoubles her efforts. The others hear my yell, and they too move as a group towards Lexa. I am first to reach her, and we stand back-to-back, the pile of dead dogs growing at our feet. Their numbers seem endless. We can’t keep this up.

Exhaustion makes my limbs heavy, and the lines on my body make every movement excruciating. The only thing keeping me going is the adrenaline, and I am bound to run out of that eventually.

The water behind me begins to splash about, and I spin on my heel, afraid I have left one of the beasts alive and behind me.

The glowing water of the river bubbles and churns. I reach over and take hold of Lexa's arm before I remember my necklace is in my pocket.

We can't use our magic, but I can't bring myself to let go of her either. A giant blue head rises out of the water, its body spiked and elongated. Massive yellow eyes take in the scene before it, even the dogs pause their attack in the presence of these creatures.

It is hard to tell where the head ends, and the body begins as the enormous beast brandishes its head back and forth, showering Lexa and myself with speckles of glowing water. Its massive mouth opens, and an ear-splitting bellow erupts from the terrifying creature. I step back from it and towards the dogs.

It lunges forward, and Lexa pulls me close shouting over the deafening thrashing of water, "It's an eel!"

The massive head knocks me down and grabs the mutant dog that is behind me, it snatches it by the leg and drags it into the water. I crawl to my feet with the help of Lexa as another eel rises from the river and dodges around Nathaniel to take one of the dogs he had been fighting. This dog meets the same fate as the first.

More eels arrive, dragging the dogs into the reddening water behind us. Most of the dogs scatter, but a few remain to fight off the eels.

The important thing is that at this moment all the monsters were ignoring us in favor of fighting each other. I turn to the group and bellow, "Run!"

I tug hard on Lexa's hand, and we break into a run, everyone following close behind us, as we high tail it away from the monsters. The sounds of their vicious quarreling far behind us. We run down alongside the river, and the bloodied water swirls beside us as our feet pound the dirt alongside it.

A small cave just off the side of the river draws my attention, and I veer towards it, a trickle of shallow river water flows through it lighting up the inside of the tunnel until it twisted out of sight.

"Do we go in?" Tash puffs.

I peer into the cave, it seems empty, but I don't want to be trapped in there with an angry monster any more than I want to be trapped out here with an angry monster.

Lexa is pale and swaying beside me, the magic has taken a heavy toll on her body.

“I don’t know, it feels kind of murderly.” Melissa's tired voice comes from behind me.

I tighten my grip on the sword in my hand. “As opposed to everything else in this place?”

Heavy breathing announces the arrival of Lucas and Nathaniel behind us. The sounds of the raging animals are still too close for comfort.

“You’re right,” Melissa agrees, “Maybe it is just your everyday run of the mill murderly. It’s not so bad when you compare it to mutant dogs, giant flesh-eating eels, and murderous vegetation.”

Lucas marches past us and into the tunnel, calling over his shoulder, “I vote we take the murder tunnel before the Jigglers find us and try to claim further revenge.”

Melissa shrugs and steps forward. “Walk in the water, it will help to hide our scent.”

Everyone hastily splashes into the shallow water and hurries down the tunnel, padding in the near darkness. I tighten my grip on Lexa's hand as we travel through the small dark cave.

We eventually come across a split in the tunnel. Three different directions each as anonymous as the last.

“Which way?” I ask, peering down the tunnels trying to get a hint about where they lead. Two of the tubes climb up and out of sight while the third middle tunnel snakes down and to the right.

The middle tunnel is the only one with any sort of lighting as the small trickling river crawls down through it.

Nathaniel shifts his massive weight as he approaches each tunnel. “The central tunnel might be submerged and, in any case, it is traveling down. That doesn’t seem like the way to get out.”

Melissa eyes him. “It could be. We could always follow each tunnel for a while and see where it leads before deciding, but it could be easy to get lost if the tunnels split further down.”

Lucas runs his hands through his hair. “Let’s not forget only one of the tunnels are lit, and we don’t have any supplies to make torches.”

Lexa's hand shakes in mine and I look up at her pale tight-lipped face. The magic has hurt her badly. I look at the group and clear my voice, “Maybe we can rest here while we choose a tunnel?”

Tash eyes Lexa and me with concern. “That sounds like an excellent idea. I am stuffed.”

Lexa clears her throat, “Okay, we shall rest for a few moments while we decide which tunnel is the best course of action.”

We all move out of the water, our boots glowing from contact with the luminous liquid. Together we pile against the wall, I sigh as I lean back against the smooth damp rock, all my limbs ache and throb from their abuse. Magic certainly has a price, I am not so sure I am willing to pay it. Then again, we would have surely perished without it.

I glance at Lexa's wounds, the green lines still stand out vividly, even casting some light on the wall behind her. It was strange the way the magic tracks appeared on her body when the dogs were repelled from the light bubble, maybe it was Lexa's magic that pushed them away?

Melissa kicks a fist-sized rock into the shallow stream, and I watch as it rolls out to the other side and glows. I point at Melissa's glowing rock and say, “We could roll some rocks in the water and use them to light the way in the dark tunnels.”

Lucas flashes a grin, “not to mention our new glow in the dark boots.”

Lexa nods beside me and then with great composure pulls herself to her feet. “We cannot stay here, we have no food and water to assist with our resting, and even as we speak, we may be tracked by those beasts outside.”

I grumble and pull myself to my feet as my whole-body screams in protest at the movement. “Which way?”

Lexa considers the tunnels. “I agree with Nathaniel, I believe the water will converge together in the third tunnel, but we have no way of knowing how far it leads. Let us take the tunnel to the right first and see what our options are.”

Lucas, Tash, and I head over to the stream to collect some of the glowing rocks from beside it. I gather a whole bunch of smaller pebbles and cram them into my pocket.

Glowing rocks in hand we venture into the right-hand cave, we travel in near darkness, the stones help, but not much. The walls reflect the strange blue light and creatures of the night skitter from the edges of the glow.

Thirst tickles my throat, and my cracked lips do their best to absorb the tiny amount of moisture in the air. Already my head has begun to ache.

We won't be able to go much longer without water. I eye the glowing rock in my hand, we may have to consider the possibility of drinking from the bright stream.

We travel down this path for no more than five minutes before we find the way blocked by an old cave in. Massive rocks are piled so high and packed so tightly together that even a team of people would take weeks to clear the tunnel.

"Well, this isn't the way," Melissa announces for anyone who had somehow missed the literal wall of rocks. We turn and retreat back down the path and gather together in front of the three tunnels.

Nathanial walks right past us and up to the left cave entrance, he stoops to peer down it. "It seems to be clear but there is a part right at the beginning that looks quite narrow, but if I can get through it the rest of you should be fine."

I glance over at Lexa's weary features, and I fight with the exhaustion within my body. Hopefully, we find a way out soon.

We squeeze through the left side entrance one at a time. I nudge Lexa in before me, and I move last, dropping little glowing stones on the ground behind me with every three or four paces. This cave is much longer than the first, and it requires a fair bit of squeezing to get through, I force myself through one such gap, and the wet rock face sticks to my hair, pulling at it with its clammy grasp. I exit the narrow space and step into a room dotted with stars.

I gape at the stunning ceiling, and it takes time for me to realize the light is caused by little blue-white grubs that hang from the ceiling, their ends glowing brightly and lighting the small cavern space around us.

"What are they?" Tash asks staring up at the roof.

Lucas steps close and inspects one, poking it gently with his index finger. The little grub lights up brightly in response, and something sticky comes away with Lucas's hand.

He holds it up to the group as if it is undeniable proof. "These are glow worms, they make silk to catch their prey, insects and the like. It's okay, they are harmless."

The group noticeably relaxes at his words, for the last few hours every type of glowing thing we had encountered had been monstrous creatures that craved blood and flesh. I am not going to lie, it is a relief knowing they aren't going to try and eat me.

Trickling catches my attention, and I turn towards the sound. A small stream of clear water dribbles from a hole in the rock face and pools in the bowl-shaped cup below it. Someone had painstakingly gone to great efforts to carve that stone bowl, the lines of a chisel are still prominent. My heart hammers in my throat and my thirst roars into life demanding to be fed. Gently I touch Lexa's hand and show her the water.

Lexa's green eyes follow my pointed hand. "Water?"

The rest of the group turns around eagerly.

Lucas pushes his glasses up his nose. "Where?"

Lexa points at the wall, and the group crowds around the small stream. Taking turns to fill their hands and drink their fill.

Once everyone has drunk all they can hold I use my hands to wipe the drying blood from my face, Lexa beside me following my lead.

Lexa turns to the group. "Let us rest here for a time, feel free to explore but do not go too far. There has been one rock fall in this tunnel already, I do not wish to lose people in another."

Everyone nods and pokes about. Personally, I have absolutely no desire for anything except sleep. I slump to the ground and inspect my arms, some of the smaller blue lines have faded, but the deeper ones remain. I look up at Lexa, she still has a long green line over her forearm and a few on the left side of her neck.

I put my hand to my pocket and find the necklace still securely in place, I am still not game to put it on, but my fear of losing it is almost as strong as my fear of using it.

Lexa sinks down beside me and puts her head in her hands. "I don't know how they are still going."

I smile ruefully. "They didn't just use their life force to repel mutant dogs and screaming mushrooms."

Lexa chuckles into her hands. "I suppose we should have heeded the words of the gifted elders, they told us this magic would have consequences."

I nod. "But without it, it is very likely we would all be dead."

Lexa nods and rubs her arm, the smaller lines on her arm have started to close, so they no longer ooze green light, but the skin around them is red and inflamed.

I look up at Lexa's face and study the way her dark brown curls fall from her hair tie to rest on her face. "I think it was your magic that

repelled the dogs when they came into contact with our light bubble.”

Lexa looks at me with surprise. “What makes you say that?”

I swallow. “Every time one of the dogs struck the light bubble, it flashed green, and a new line appeared on your body.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “You have lines on your body too.”

I nod and look at the score of blue cuts across my arms. “Mine appeared steadily after the first blue flash. I think it is possible our magic may be specialized.”

Lexa stares thoughtfully at my arms. “What is your specialty?”

I shrug and give her a grin. “I didn’t say I had it figured out. I am just guessing based on random events, I could be putting it together all wrong.”

Lexa nods. “Even so, it is a theory we should consider going forward.”

Tash pops her head out of a narrow gap she had been exploring. “You two should come and see this.”

Lexa shakes her head and climbs to her feet before holding her hand out to me. “No rest for the wicked.”

I smile and take her hand acutely aware of how it feels grasped in mine. She helps pull me to my feet, and along with the others we head over the place Tash's head had materialized from moments before. Everyone else had squeezed through the gap, Lexa and I are the last to force our way through the hole. Tash had set a few glowing rocks at her feet, and their ghostly light reveals two skeletons laying side by side on a tattered mat.

Chapter Eighteen

They are holding one another, their meager belongings are scattered around them and a pool of dried blood coats the floor underneath them.

I notice a tattered basket near my foot, and I carefully open it, the lid pulls away from the rest of the container even with my attempts at being gentle. Inside is a leather pouch, better preserved than the basket, a rolled hide and two metal water canteens.

I pull everything from the basket and lay it on the floor. Melissa bends over the skeletons and inspects them. “Neither of them have weapons, their injuries must have been caused by something else.” She pauses and points to the leg of the one closest to her. “Those are tooth marks, if I had to guess I would say these unfortunate people encountered the same beasts we did.”

Tash wipes her face. “What a sad place to die alone.”

“They weren’t alone,” I say as I look over the two embracing skeletons. “They had each other.”

Lexa crouches down beside me, her knee brushing mine. “What have you found?” She selects the rolled hide and gently opens it, hastily scribbled words were rushed across the surface.

I swallow. “Is that written in blood?”

Lexa nods and reads the words aloud, “Darkmor's magic is flawed, he can be stopped.”

I sit back on my feet. “What does that mean?”

Lexa shrugs and carefully pockets the note. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

I open the pouch and find some tarnished silver coins, and two golden rings with the word ‘forever’ engraved along the inside. Within the furthest corner of the pouch, I find a small square of leather with a scary face drawn on to it. I study the image, the mouth is lopsided and filled with jagged teeth and the eyes, one slightly larger than the other. It is unnerving looking at the image, uncomfortable I stuff the picture back into the pouch and turn to the other items on the floor in front of me.

Nathanial stoops to collect one of the tarnished silver coins. “This is the currency of Solaris, see the Phoenix on the back.”

“How do you know what currency from Solaris looks like?” Lucas pries.

Nathanial tenses. “My father used to collect coins like this.” The tension visibly affects the room as it enters an awkward silence.

I am dying to ask about Nathanial's dad but every time it is brought up everyone becomes nervous. It is probably best to leave it for now, I am sure the answers will come out soon enough.

I hold up the rings from the bag. “I think they were mated.”

Lexa takes the rings from my hand and inspects them. “How were they allowed to keep these?”

Lucas snuffles. “They kept it a secret?”

Melissa shakes her head. “These bones are almost two decades old, judging from the bleaching. The coins only help to confirm my suspicions. I think these people were captured in one of the first waves, but they escaped Darkmor only to die here.”

Tash nods. “I don’t see any other way they could have been allowed to keep mating rings.”

I hold the two small rings in my hand and slowly return them to the pouch. I tie it and the coins securely to my belt.

I look at the bones. At least they were together in the end.

We crawl out of the small space and Nathanial goes to clean and fill our new found water containers.

Lucas shifts his feet awkwardly. “The way ahead of us is blocked, there is a gap but it is too narrow to crawl through, I was looking into it when Tash called us over.”

Lexa sighs. “Alright, everyone have a drink before we go. We will head down the third tunnel. We will see where it leads us, we may have to swim.”

My stomach clenches. I cannot swim. My cheeks flush as I encounter yet another thing I cannot do. Thanking the darkness in the cave I keep the information to myself, I will share it if it becomes necessary.

We head back down the cave, weariness pulls at my limbs insistent that I pay attention to it. The problem is that even if we do stop, I am not sure I will be able to rest in this strange and hazardous world. At least in the arena, I knew what wanted to kill me, and before today I had never been attacked by a plant.

We squeeze past the narrow corner and once again face the three tunnels. Only the middle remains, the stream steadily flowing down through it.

We head down the glowing tunnel and walk in silence for a while.

Lucas scuffs his feet in front of me. "My feet hurt." He complains, distracting me from my thoughts of what is ahead of us. "Also, my throat," he adds.

"That's probably from all the running and screaming we have done today," Tash replies her blue eyes bright with the reflected light from the stream.

Melissa chuckles. "I am sure there was more screaming than running coming from Lucas."

"Very manly screaming," Lucas adds in his deepest voice.

A smile spreads across my cheeks, even Nathaniel lets out a short bark of laughter.

The silence returns and my stomach makes its demands known to the world. A loud rumble echoes across the tunnel walls and my cheeks burn red.

"We need to find something to eat," Tash declares as she sloshes along through the shallow glowing water.

"Yeah, before Claire starts deciding which one of us would be the easiest to take down and have for dinner," Melissa suggests with a sly smile. "It's Lucas by the way."

"Hey!" Lucas squeals in protest, holding his hands up. "You don't want to eat me, I'm all lanky and tough. I'm not good to eat at all."

"You're right," Nathaniel agrees. "She would probably eat you and be hungry again in half an hour anyway."

Tash and Melissa roar in laughter while Lucas and I scowl at them.

Lexa chuckles and gently runs her hand down my arm sending a wave of tingles across my body. "I am sure we will find something to eat soon," Lexa reassures me and gives me one of her half-smiles. "If not, I will help you catch Lucas."

Laughter erupts from my throat.

Lucas runs his hands through his hair and grumbles, "I can't trust anyone."

Our shallow water wading rises steadily from our ankles to our knees as we trudge through the cave tunnel.

Ahead of us, the tunnel widens suddenly, and rocks peek out from under the water, breaking through the calm surface. Thick green moss clings to these rocks, creating a blanket of green amongst the glowing ice blue of the liquid around them.

Dotting the moss are tiny purple flowers that open to reveal red pollen, casting a rich sweet scent into the cave around us. Small insects buzz around these little purple flowers before shooting off to climb into a hive of some kind in the upper corner of the cavern roof.

On the moss, in clumps, hangs clusters of small pink balls, my stomach rumbles again. Maybe they are edible?

My eyes are drawn to columns of glowing stalactites and stalagmites that grow haphazardly amongst the rocks, adding to the strange beauty of the pool.

The glowing water gently moves and ripples its way through the bizarre landscape, causing light to dance across the ceiling in hypnotizing patterns. The whole scene is astonishingly beautiful.

I cast a glance at Lexa who is taking in the scene before us in much the same way. Lexa walks ahead of me and stoops to inspect a bunch of pink fruits.

“If I say this place is beautiful, are you guys going to ruin it somehow?” I ask taking in the view.

“No,” Lucas quietly replies as he stares at the cavern around us.

“Give it some time, and I am sure a horrible monster of some sort will,” Melissa comments, narrowing her eyes at the view in front of us with extreme suspicion.

Tash nudges Melissa's shoulder with her own. “Mel, why do you always have to be so negative?”

Melissa shrugs. “I dunno, it probably has something to do with everything that has been trying to kill me over the last twenty-four hours.”

Tash chuckles. “Okay, point taken.” With that, she struts bravely through the water towards the closest flower.

Her bravery doesn't last long, and she begins to slow until she is arm's length from the nearest flower. Slowly, tentatively she reaches towards it.

I watch in amusement as Tash inches her hand closer to the tiny flower like she expects it to bite her.

Given the experiences of the past few days, I really can't blame Tash for her newfound fear of vegetation.

Even so, watching a grown woman approach a flower no bigger than a thumbnail much in the same way that someone in the arena would approach a wild and unpredictable beast is funny.

Tash touches the flower with the tip of her finger and smiles victoriously when the flower doesn't maul her to death. Carefully she perches on a moss-covered rock and regards the cavern around her in awe.

I look around the room, glowing water swirling around my knees. "It seems like the safest place we have stopped for a long while."

"Not to mention the Jiggler's are afraid of the water, and they would have to swim to get to us in here." Lucas adds pushing his hair out of his face.

"And the stream on the way in was too shallow and long for the fish or eels to get in here either," adds Melissa.

"Let's stay here for a while, it's a nice place to sit and rest," Tash says to the group and smiles over at Nathaniel, patting the moss-covered rock next to her.

The massive warrior saunters past me and over to Tash where he drops onto the small rock, apparently quite content. Even if it is on a moss-covered rock surrounded by tiny purple flowers in the middle of a glowing pool of water.

"Very manly," Lucas mutters to Melissa. They both snicker before they wander off to inspect the stalagmites closest to them.

I glance at Lexa as she carefully plucks a pink fruit from the moss and inspects it. The green line on her arm still stands out vividly, it is taking much longer to heal than it did the last time.

I glance at my own arm, most of the lines have faded, and just a handful of small sore blue cuts remain. I fiddle with the gem in the hidden pocket of my pants, even if we manage to find the others, how are we supposed to use them against Darkmor?

If this is the consequence of using the magic against nature, what would it be like against someone experienced in sorcery?

I shake my head and dismiss the thought, it doesn't change the fact that we have to try.

Carefully, I move towards one of the larger rocks and climb up onto it, glad to finally have my legs and feet out of the water, even if they do

glow brilliantly. I lean on my elbows and stare at the shimmering roof. Who knew Darkmor's underworld dominion could have beautiful places like this?

Lexa calls out to the group. "Lucas, I believe these are Elmaras, what do you think?"

I sit up and watch the interaction. Lucas sloshes over to Lexa in a hurry and inspects the small berry in her hand. "Yay, Claire doesn't have to eat me!"

Lexa gives him a smile. "I take it that you agree with my assessment then?"

Lucas nods enthusiastically and to prove his point takes the fruit from Lexa's hand and pops it in his mouth. "Mmm," he mumbles. "Nice and sweet."

The group spreads out and picks from the abundant bunches of berries, I move to get up, but Lexa has climbed up on the rock next to me and holds out a cluster of the small pink fruits for us to share.

I flash her a smile. "Thanks."

Carefully I take a small berry and place it in my mouth, the skin is crunchy, and the whole fruit seems to burst over my tongue when I bite down on it. A fantastic array of sensations follow, it is juicy and sweet, ending in a tangy after flavor.

I have never tasted fresh fruit before. It is so much better than the dried fruit I occasionally received in the compound. Eagerly I pop three more in my mouth.

Lexa chuckles and crosses her legs as she settles down across from me. "Eat it slowly, there is plenty here, I don't need you choking. This is also the first time you have had this fruit, so you should limit your intake until you are sure how your body will respond."

I smile and slow myself down, I stare up at the shimmering and watch as the light of the water dances across the walls and roof. "It's beautiful."

"The way the light moves is pleasing to the eye," Lexa confirms.

My lips quirk into a smile, Lexa has this way of talking that is different from anyone I have ever encountered.

I lay back with my hands behind my head and watch a glowing white lizard dart onto the moss covered rock and work on prying one of the small fruits from the bunch hanging nearby.

The moss is so soft against my back that I doze lightly, the sounds of the quiet little cave and the warmth of Lexa beside me helping me to drift into a relaxed sleep.

I awake to find green eyes gazing at me thoughtfully as Lexa twirls a small purple flower in between her fingers.

Our eyes meet, and Lexa's cheeks gain a shade of pink to her olive complexion. I take a moment to admire the slight tinge of red across her cheeks before I admit to being awake enough to sit up.

I stretch my arms. "How long have I been asleep for?"

Lexa shrugs, "A few hours, most people dozed. I kept watch, all is well."

My eyebrows pull together as I study the weariness in Lexa's features, she really should have been the one to sleep. Her small green lines have healed, and only the long green one on her forearm remains. It is obvious the healing is using up the little energy she had left since using the magic necklaces back in the glowing land of mushrooms.

"Lexa," I say. "How are you feeling?"

The older woman looks at me. "I am well, I can keep going for another few hours at least. Being the leader of a rebel camp certainly brings one's endurance to its peak, there was not much time for resting then either."

I reach out to touch her hand gently. "There is no need to push yourself so hard here, there are five others who can share the responsibility."

Lexa gives me a small smile. "Perhaps next time. Now we must continue, we have stopped for too long as it is."

I had to agree with her there. "Let's collect some of this fruit first. It probably won't keep for long, but it would be nice to have some food with us."

Lexa nods and with a sigh climbs off our moss rock and back into the glowing water. I climb down with a loud splash which stirs Tash who is asleep using Nathaniel's leg as a pillow, a small pile of unfinished fruits lay beside them.

I raise my eyebrow at the two of them. It will be interesting to see how that turns out. I grab a bundle of fruit and pack it into the small pouch that contains the coins and rings. The pink berries fill the whole space, and I tie the bulging bag to my belt once more.

Lucas is splayed across a rock nearby snoring loudly, his hands and feet dangle off the edge to dip into the ice blue water. His mouth is stained with pink from the fruit he had eaten.

Lexa is waking Melissa, who had fallen asleep against a rock of her own, fruits still held protectively in her hand.

It is weird we all fell asleep, surely Melissa and Lucas had enough sleep before the dog's attack. Certainly, a lot has happened since then, but they should be more awake than the rest of us.

My eyes fall on the cluster of pink fruits nearby and spy the small white lizard sleeping peacefully, a half-eaten fruit beside it. I eye the pink fruit with suspicion.

I turn back to look at my sleeping companions, we had all eaten the fruit. Lexa shakes Melissa vigorously, but the dark-haired woman remains peacefully asleep. Concern rises in my stomach as I splash towards Lucas and attempt to wake him. He remains unresponsive and snores loudly at my attempts to wake him. Well, at least he isn't dead. I move away from him and over to the nearest cluster of fruits growing from one of the moss-covered columns. They look innocent enough.

I look over at Lexa. "Is it the fruit?"

Lexa turns to me and rubs her hand across her face. "It could be but, Elmaras do not have this side effect."

"What if they are not Elmaras?"

Chapter Nineteen

Lexa's eyes widen. "It is possible we misidentified them, but it is unusual for Lucas to be wrong in regard to botany."

The world around us rumbles, and ripples appear throughout the water as it shifts with the cave around us. Small rocks fall from the roof and land in the water around us, and the cave pillar in front of me cracks. Long ribbons of lines appear along the ice blue surface and climb all the way to the roof.

Lexa splashes over and pulls me into her arms, away from the pillar as it collapses into the shallow lake where I was standing moments before, sending waves of water in every direction. A wave hits us in the chest and we stumble but stay standing. I cling to the woman as the world shakes more vigorously and rumbles like an angry animal. Sections of rock fall from the roof, and more columns follow the first into the water. The rumbling ceases, and the ground below us stops moving, I stand inside Lexa's arms for a few more moments until I am sure it has truly passed.

Gently, I pull away from the warmth of the strong woman beside me and look over at our companions. They are still asleep, Lucas has a cut across one cheek, and everyone seems to be covered in a light dusting of dirt from the cavern roof.

I look over at the fallen pillar and swallow. "What was that?"

Lexa shakes her head. "I don't know. It was similar to a cave in, perhaps there was one further down in one of the tunnels we explored earlier?"

I nod, that must be it.

Nathanial stirs and rubs his face. He looks around in confusion, his glazy eyes focus on the destruction around him and finally at the sleeping woman in his lap.

A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth before his brain registers the danger he had slept through.

Nathanial rubs his face again and spots us. "Was there a cave in?"

Lexa nods. "We believe that, or something similar occurred a few moments ago."

Nathanial looks around. "And I slept through it?" His face slowly tenses as his body works through the sleep fog.

Lucas lets out an extremely loud snore and starts himself awake. "What happened?" he asks with a yawn as he rubs his bleeding cheek.

"The ground shook," Lexa states bluntly. "I do believe we misidentified these fruits, we were unable to rouse you, and you slept through this whole cave system shaking."

Lucas frowns and stretches. "I don't misidentify plants." Sluggishly he crawls off the rock and staggers through the water. "Although, there is a first time for everything."

He grabs hold of a bunch of fruit and squints at it, slowly pulling apart the fruit and scrutinizing it every step of the way.

Melissa stirs and looks confused at the cluster of fruit in her hand. "I feel like I have been drugged."

Lucas nods. "That is because we were." He holds up the mangled fruit in his hand. "These are not Elmaras, they look the same in every way, except the skin on the inside of the fruit is purple and not red like it should be."

Lexa brushes the dust off her leather tunic. "Perhaps the fruit evolved over time to have this side effect?"

Lucas nods. "Yes, but why?"

I shrug and glance at the cracked cave walls. "I don't know, but I don't really want to hang around to find out."

Nathanial gently shakes Tash who lays still and doesn't respond, he looks up, and I detect a look of panic in his eyes. I head over to answer his unasked question.

I approach Tash and quickly notice her slow even breathing, I put my fingers to her throat the way my mother had shown me when I was a small girl. Her blood steadily pumps under my fingers and I let out a sigh of relief.

I look up at Nathanial. "She is still asleep, she will be okay."

Nathanial tries to stir Tash gently. "The rest of us are awake, why isn't she? We ate the same amount of fruit."

I nod. "My mother used to tell me about her job, once she told me of a goblin who was so fat, she had to give him twice the amount of sleeping medicine for his surgery, and that if she had of given that dose to a smaller goblin it would have made them sleep for twice as long."

Nathanial's eyebrows frown. "I don't understand."

I gesture to Tash. "Tash is a lot smaller than you are, and if you ate the same amount of fruit, it will take her twice as long to wake as you did."

Nathanial looks at me, and for the first time, I realize his eyes are brown. "Are you certain?"

I consider my words carefully. "I am not certain, I don't have much medical training. But I am confident that this situation is like the goblins."

Nathanial seems satisfied with my answer and gently scoops the small woman into his arms. It is truly amazing to see someone as powerfully built as Nathanial be so careful with the fragile woman.

Everyone groups together, and tiredly we stumble out of the shallow underground lake and up the winding tunnel. It is weird moving out of the brightly lit chamber and into the darkness of the sweeping tunnel. The glowing rocks we had collected before leaving the underground oasis provide our only light. The eerie light casts little shadows and reveals the deep cracks in the tunnel walls.

This place won't survive another shake like the one we had before.

We walk for nearly an hour before Tash stirs and can walk herself through the dark tunnel. Her wake up must have been more brutal than ours, it would be so strange to wake up in a place where you did not fall asleep.

Nathanial sets her down on the ground and walks behind the stumbling woman, ready to catch her should she fall.

We take another turn and squeeze through a narrow pass. Every time we meet one of these places, I am afraid we will find another dead end. I don't like the idea of having to brave the land of mushrooms again, and that will be our only option if this tunnel ends.

Lucas sighs loudly. "It sure is nice to be in a place where things aren't trying to kill us," he comments opening and closing his arms in a snapping motion that mimics jaws.

"What about the poison berries?" Melissa questions.

"I am not sure the berries were trying to kill us," Lexa says twirling a purple flower she had picked between her fingers.

"What I am trying to say," Lucas says waving his arms around. "Is that I haven't run screaming for at least four hours, and that's a nice change."

“I’m fairly certain if someone so much as sneezed when Tash first approached those purple flowers, she would have run screaming.” I joke and step out of Tash’s reach.

Tash sends me a death glare that could rival my own. Melissa pats her on the shoulder and grins. “Don’t look at her like that, you were kinda twitchy around the flowers.”

Tash sighs and rubs her temples. “Those mushrooms messed me up. I may never trust plant life again.”

Nathanial steps up beside Tash offering quiet comfort, and perhaps protection from any attacking vegetation. Tash smiles up at him as they walk side by side.

I peer up the tunnel and get the smallest sense of light coming from ahead, I glance at the group. “Is it getting brighter?”

Everyone ceases their quiet conversations and turns their attention to the tunnel ahead of us. Lexa clears her throat, “I believe so.”

Melissa skips a step. “Yes, let’s get out of this damned tunnel, the idea that even the slightest sneeze could bring on another tunnel collapse has been weighing on me.”

I nod and eye the deep cracks in the wall. Melissa is not the only one to be thinking along those lines. I will be glad to get out of this cave, I feel as if the echo of our footsteps will be enough to bring the cave down.

The closer we get, the more apparent it becomes that the way out will require us to squeeze through a small gap and climb some rocks to the exit, all of which sits about eight meters off the ground. Down the right-hand side of this bridge is a gaping black hole.

I eye the unsteady slope of rocks that lead to the narrow nook and the pitch-black pit standing beside it. Why can’t these things be easy?

I take my place behind Lexa as Lucas leads the way up the narrow pebble bridge that leads to our only escape from this hell hole. I begin my ascent trying to find sure footing on a shifting landscape, I am halfway up when the rock I place my foot on slides out from under me. I fall to my knees and rocks shower in all directions, only Melissa and Lexa’s quick acting hands prevent me from following the rocks down the slope.

The little stones clatter and tumble into the dark hole at the base of our small rock bridge. It takes a long time for the rolling rocks to stop their clattering movements. Sweat breaks out across my skin as I deliberately steer my thoughts from what could have just happened.

Slowly, I climb to my feet, my shaking limbs doing their best to betray me as I resume the perilous climb.

Lucas is first to reach the narrow platform and sneaks a peek through the gap, a slip of light dances over his face. He draws a long knife, the metal ringing softly as he pulls it from its sheath. The noise echoes around the fragile cave, and everyone looks at him.

“What?” Lucas asks, sparing us a glance before he returns his attention to the exit. “The last time I walked out of a cave I spent the following hours in various levels of terror.” Lucas defends, shifting his grip on his knife. “Sorry if I am not filled with warm fuzzy feelings.”

I have to agree with his reasoning, and as I step up onto the platform, I draw my sword and stealthily follow Lexa and Lucas through the gap.

Chapter Twenty

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the light of the cavern, although it is not as bright as a fire would have been, it is still far lighter than the dimness our eyes have been straining in as we walked through the tunnels.

In the distance, a high building shines brightly, belching thick smoke into the cavern. The building must be burning one colossal fire, out of the chimneys, flames lick the air between the cavern and its roof. The flaming chimneys cast an ominous orange light that reflects off the billowing smoke inside the high cavern that makes up Shadowsoul.

The whole building emits a surprising amount of light. This structure is so far away I can only make out individual parts, like the main section and the two massive chimneys, but even so, the effect this building is having on the cavern is enormous.

I gape at the orange smoke. Is this what has been lighting the dim cavern for all these years? Lexa peers in between the tube-like plants around us, scanning the area for immediate danger.

I direct my gaze at the large, sturdy plants, on tiptoes I could touch the top of the tallest one. They are impressive, but still small compared to the mushrooms in Ethira.

These bulbous plants are a dull yellowy brown, and it would take two people linking hands to circle the thick trunk of just one. Sad little leaves puff from the top and reach towards the dim cavern light, wilting even as they grow.

I step into a small ring of boulders that are scattered around the squat trees, snuggled between almost all the gaps are small clusters of mushrooms. I eye them with suspicion.

I crouch to run my fingers through a thick carpet of yellow-green moss, the soft plant tickles my fingers and cushions my feet. Sadly, there are only a few patches of this magnificent plant, and they grow in dark spots between the plants.

Lucas approaches the nearest tree and expertly plucks a brown ball from the top of one of the plants and cracks it open with the butt of his knife.

“You guys might not trust me after our last wild food encounter, but I promise these are balooga seeds. It was my job to run the machinery that refined these, once they are cooked the white meat inside can be eaten.”

Melissa steps up to the fruit. “I have eaten these before, I am sure they are safe.”

For the next half hour, the group splits up and collects a few of the balooga seeds while Lexa and I collect wood for the fire. Most of our ‘wood’ comes in the form of balooga bark. I struggle with the strike flint a few times but on the fifth go a spark flies off and into our pile of wood. Eagerly Lexa and I blow at it, and the little spark catches, multiplying until flames leap about merrily.

Lexa shuffles over to the moss patch I am in and sits in it, I shuffle over to make room for her. Her eyes have deep bags, and the cut on her arm has still not healed over. It is just a small green line, but I am concerned her lack of sleep has to do with how slow she is healing.

“Why don’t you sleep?” I ask her.

Lexa looks at me. “There is much to be done.”

I raise an eyebrow and nudge the woman. “Much that can be done by others while you sleep. You must be wrecked by that fruit we had earlier, not to mention everything that happened before then. I don’t know how you even managed to stay awake.”

Lexa rubs her eyes. “It was not easy.”

I pat the soft moss beside me. “Sleep. I will wake you when food is ready, or if anything happens.”

Lexa reluctantly lies down, her commonsense warring with her need to help. Eventually, the rational part of her brain wins the battle for sleep and Lexa curls up beside me by the fire.

It takes a few moments, but her breathing evens out and sleep overcomes her. I stay and keep watch, steadily adding fuel to the fire, building it the way Lucas had shown me to get it nice and hot.

I have a merry blaze by the time the others have returned with six fist-sized fruits. Melissa holds up a water canteen. “The trees hold water, and releasing it is as easy as a small puncture with a knife.”

I smile at her. “And how did you figure that out?”

Melissa shrugs casually. “I threw one of my knives at the tree and water seeped out around it.”

I shake my head softly and watch how Lucas sets about splitting the balooga seeds and peeling out the flesh. Nathaniel unearths a sizeable flat rock from the sandy soil and inspects it. Seemingly satisfied, he brushes the slate clean with his palm and places it on the red-hot embers. I tense up, the last time we put rocks in the fire they had exploded, I had seen for myself the damage they did to those pink dogs.

Tash senses my tension. "It is okay, only river rocks, crystals and any sort of shiny rock explode. Standard grey, boring rocks are just fine to use." She indicates to the rock resting on the hot embers. "In about an hour this rock will be hot enough to cook the flesh from the balooga seeds, so we don't have to char it with the fire."

I lean forward to inspect the rock, eager to learn. "So, it works like the small metal pans the guards use to cook their meat?"

Tash furrows her eyebrows. "I never spent a lot of time with guards, when I was imprisoned, I was a type of engineer, they don't really regard us as a high priority, and we aren't really guarded."

Nathaniel shifts uncomfortably. "Yes. It is like the metal pans the guard's use, except this takes longer to heat and cool down."

I pick up a small rock from nearby and hold it up. "Is this the right type of rock?"

Nathaniel takes my stone and inspects it, he shakes his head. "No, see the glassy line through the middle here, this rock has quartz, and it is very likely to explode in the fire."

I take the pebble back and roll it through my fingers, tracing the faint white line that runs through the center. I discard my rock and begin searching for a new one, this time I pick up four different stones before I choose one to show Nathaniel.

The grey rock in my hand looks inconspicuous enough, it seems like just another dull rock, there doesn't seem to be anything pretty about it, so I take it over to Nathaniel and hold it out for him.

He takes this one and inspects it again. "Yes, this one would work, not that it's much good, is too small to cook food on."

I nod at him and take my rock back to my spot by the fire. Now that I know what type of stone to look for, I start to see them everywhere, and I pick up five more before I have taken my seat.

Lucas has cracked open all the seeds and has already pulled the white flesh from two of them, I grab the empty husk.

These would be a right size for tea, I look over at Lexa, too bad we don't have any of her metal kettles to boil the water with.

I look out at the cavern around us, I haven't seen any wildlife since we left the tunnel. I don't know if that is a good or bad thing, maybe it has something to do with how much thicker the air seems to be over here.

My eyes strain into the darkness surrounding the trees. Or perhaps it is because the animals here have reason to fear us, I can't imagine the animals in Ethira have much contact with humanoid species, so they haven't been regularly hunted before, the screaming mushrooms make sure of that. But out here, who knows?

"Too bad we don't have a kettle," Tash says as she relaxes back, and watches Melissa start to cook the white flesh Lucas is harvesting.

"Why?" Lucas questions using his juice coated hand to push his glasses back up his nose.

"Doesn't balooga sap from the fruiting trees make a sweet tea?"

Lucas pauses for a moment. "Yes, but you have to collect it from the roots, and as you said, we have nothing to boil water in, it would just harden if you put it into cold water."

I look into the fire and the sizzling rock Melissa was working with. "What about the hot rocks?"

"What?" Nathaniel grunts.

I point at the small rocks I had collected that sit between me and the fire. "What if we heated the rocks and put them in water held by these shell things?" I say holding up the empty yellow husk.

Nathaniel blinks at me for a moment, and everyone waits in silence. "That could work, but how would you get the hot rocks out of the fire? A rock like that will get very hot."

I deflate a little, I hadn't thought about that part.

Tash is quick to step in with an idea. "What if we make wooden tongs out of balooga bark? They wouldn't last very long, but it should work to get the rocks out of the fire and into the makeshift cups."

I smile and eagerly place my rocks into the fire as Tash sets about making tongs while Nathaniel and Melissa go to collect the sap.

The sizzling balooga flesh fills the air around us, and I take a deep breath of the creamy sweet scent. My stomach rumbles loudly in response, and I place my hand there to quieten it.

I sit patiently as Lucas turns the meat with his knife. "It will be ready in a moment," he declares with a small smile.

I turn to Lexa and take in her relaxed face, her chestnut brown hair gently tumbling over her shoulder to pool beside the arm she is using as a pillow. It seems so unfair to wake her, but I promised. Gently I lay my hand on her shoulder and give it a gentle squeeze. "Lexa," I say in a low voice. "It is time to wake up, dinner is ready."

Lexa's green eyes flutter open, and she rubs them with her fists, I inspect her forearm, and I am relieved to see her marks are gone. I hold a makeshift balooga seed bowl of white meat out to her. "Dinner is ready."

Lexa takes the bowl and carefully sits up, she takes stock of everything around her, as if to truly ensure she had not failed the group as a leader in her sleep.

I return my attention to the food in my own shell. A small white beetle crawls along the rim of my bowl and has the audacity to dip its hungry nippers into my dinner. "Get your own," I mutter as I flick the insect away.

I take a small white chunk of spicy scented meat and pop it into my mouth, the rich flavor rolls across my tongue. The flesh from the seed is undoubtedly tasty and has a light fruity aftertaste.

It doesn't take me long to finish my dinner.

I fill my empty seed shell with water and use Tash's wooden tongs to extract a hot rock from the fire. As soon as it contacts the water, it hisses violently, and within minutes the water has reached a rolling boil. Carefully I use the tongs to remove the rock and set it aside. I don't know if it is still hot, but after seeing what it did to the water, I am not going to touch it to find out.

Slowly I pour in a measure of the tree sap and stir the liquid in with the tip of my knife, and the water turns a pale red. I take a deep sniff of the fruity tea and hold the cup out for Lexa to take.

The woman raises her eyebrows and sets down her empty bowl to gently take mine into her hands. Carefully she takes a sniff and a small sip.

A small smile crawls on to her face. "This is delightfully fruity."

I smile and repeat the same procedure with Lexa's bowl until I have a steaming cup of my own, I hand over the tongs to Tash who is eager to prepare a cup for herself.

I sit back and slowly sip my sweet tea. Since I have been introduced to this world of flavored drinkable liquid, I haven't been able to get enough of it and I enjoy the freedom of having it whenever the chance arises.

The warm cup helps to take the chill from my fingers, it is always so cold in the cavern, now that I am fed and watered my body has found something else to complain about. I tuck my knees to my chest to keep warm, the fire helps but almost all the wood had been used for cooking, and now only a medium heat remains. Not enough to altogether remove the chill from the air.

Silently Lexa shifts closer and presses her side against mine, the warmth from her immediately works to soothe the shaking that had begun in my hands.

We stay drinking and eating quietly until the fire has burned so low it no longer offers any comfort in the cold dark cavern.

Lexa rises to her feet with a stretch, "We need to keep moving, it is essential we figure out where we are and how much further it is to Erast. Those problems will not be solved sitting here."

I sigh, Lexa is right, but my body is only used to short bouts of adrenalin rushing endurance. Arena matches lasted three hours at most and then for the time after that I was locked in a cage. My body hasn't trained to be accustomed to this almost constant long-term movement. I pull my weary muscles into action, I suppose if I don't push through this, I will always have this problem.

I climb to my aching feet and do my best to stretch out my sore muscles. Lexa leads the group towards the flaming factory in the distance, I eye it with distaste. Hopefully, we don't have to go too close.

Since we climbed out of the tunnel, I have been aware of the awful acidic smell of burning oil the factory seems to produce. Not to mention the thickness that fills the air. I rub my head, and hope this headache passes.

We trudge along the uneven terrain, and I stumble around boulders and stunted plants. Everything here looks sick, even the mushrooms sag.

Eventually, we come to a hard packed dirt road that is roughly wide enough to accommodate a large wagon. Judging by the deep ruts down the middle and the large piles of animal droppings, it did so quite regularly.

Lexa peers both ways down the track. "I think for now it should be safe to use the road, but should someone even suspect they hear a wagon or any creatures approaching we should get off and retreat into the cover of trees."

Nathanial nods. "That is wise, no free humans roam the open, and if scarlet guards find us, they will not show mercy."

"Are there any free colonies of people?" I ask, thinking of the scarlet guards and their families.

Lexa shakes her head. "Only rebels who live in secret communities."

I dodge around a knee-high balooga tree and its withered leaves. "What about the guards?"

Nathanial clears his throat and replies, "Even the guards are slaves. Some may enjoy the freedom to select mates and live in houses, but even they are monitored and confined to a type of compound. Their freedom is limited to their position.

"They do have these holiday camps for the two months a year guards are off duty, these are still monitored, but there are groups of entertainers that travel through places like this." Nathanial finishes.

I pause to consider his words. "Is Erast one of these holiday camps?"

Lexa nods. "It is."

I swallow. "So, we are deliberately heading towards one of the places filled with people whose job it is to seek out and destroy rebels?"

Lexa grips the hilt of her sword. "I am afraid so. Our only hope is to encounter the entertainers before they arrive."

I fight back the wave of adrenalin. "And the entertainers are?"

"Usually, illegal." Lexa quickly fills in. "They are not associated with the rebels, nor are they against them, like queltons they realize they double their potential income by not choosing sides."

I bite my lip. "Queltons?"

"Illegal traders." Nathanial grumps.

I fall silent as my thoughts travel to Darkmor and his monstrous minions, they really did have complete control over the human race. I glance at the group around me. Well, almost.

The dirt road is long, but traveling without having to dodge obstacles is a nice change, and if you walked along the edge you could avoid most of the piles of animal dung.

I eye a pile of excrement as I pass it. The waste easily rises to my knee and is about half as long as it is wide. It is hard to believe that animals big enough to make that pile actually exist, my nose scrunches of its own accord as we weave our way through the manure-laden road.

The further we traveled along the road the brighter our surroundings become, the more uneasy I become about the growing factory in the distance. The road narrows, and on one side the trees begin to disappear until there is a sharp drop into a dark cavernous crack beside us.

Cautiously I peer over the edge, but strain as I might, I can't see the bottom.

Melissa toes a rock to the edge and pushes it over.

I count the seconds it takes to land. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. A loud clunk rings out from below us as the rock crashes against something substantial in the gaping hole beside us.

Melissa raises her eyebrows and whistles. "Wow, that's a big one."

I nod. "How far do you think it goes?"

Melissa shrugs. "It is usually around 10 meters for every second the rock falls."

I look back at the hole. "I counted six seconds."

Lexa comes to stand beside us. "That is around 60 meters."

Melissa steps back from the ledge. "That is not a hole you want to fall down."

We all back away from the edge and stay closer to the other side of the narrowing road. The cavernous gap lingers beside us for some time, a gaping inky hole of death. Up ahead the edge of the road that isn't a giant drop becomes a steep unscalable cliff face. Even if we had walked in the trees, I suspect we would have been forced onto the road by this mountainous obstacle.

I slow down to walk beside Lexa who is bringing up the rear of our party. "Any idea where we are?"

Lexa shakes her head. "I have never traveled through this place before. When I do travel to other bases, it is always through mountain passes, this is too open, and the chances of getting caught are increased drastically."

Lucas spins around suddenly and peers into the distance. "Did you guys hear that?"

“Hear what?” Tash asks going through a pouch attached to one of her many belts.

Melissa pauses. “No, I heard it too.”

I stop to listen. A definite rustling is happening deep in the trees beside us, my fight or flight instinct kicks in, and I have a deep impulse to flee.

Tash cocks her head. “Animals maybe?”

Lucas wrings his hands. “Let’s just hurry up and get away from here.”

The group tightens up, and we make it to the part of the road with the sharp cliff face. We don’t make it more than ten steps when deep laughter rings through the semi-darkness of our surrounds.

I follow the sound and look up to find two vomit yellow creatures prying a large rock free from the wall with two long metal poles. A section of rock tumbles off the cliff face.

“Look out,” I bellow as I dive back to avoid the avalanche of rocks, Lexa lands in the dirt beside me. The noise as the rocks rumble past to settle in the dust on the road is almost unbearable, the violent vibrations hurt my legs and stomach.

The noise ceases, and I pull my head out of my arms and look around. Dust clouds still float about, and a deep pile of rocks blocks the way between me, Lexa, and the rest of the road.

I pull Lexa to her feet, a decent graze sits on her left cheek. I look at our side of the road, and I don’t see anyone else from our group.

I look back at the deep pile of rocks in front of me. “Are you guys, okay?” I shout over the boulders.

A chorus of voices calls back intelligible words. After a short pause, I take another breath to call out again, but a voice cuts me off.

“Us four are still alive.” Melissa's voice shouts back. “Is Lexa with you?”

Lexa beats my response. “I am here. Do you see any way over these rocks?”

I head over and begin to climb, I struggle up halfway before a rock gives in and tumbles out from under my feet. I fall ungracefully down the pile of stones, causing numerous small ones to tumble after me. They spill across my body leaving minor bruises and cuts in their wake.

I look up at Lexa who is watching me with a raised eyebrow, I give her a weak smile. “I don’t think we can get over that way.”

I pull myself to my feet and do my best to brush off the dust and small pebbles that cling to my hair and clothing.

Nathanial's voice carries over the rocks. "There are too many unstable rocks to climb and shifting them would take days."

The dust around us settles and my eyes land on a group of unpleasantly colored creatures advancing on us. My stomach clenches with fear and my heart pounds so hard I think it will find its way out of my chest.

I flick my eyes to Lexa as I reach for the sword at my waist. "Goblins."

Chapter Twenty-one

Lexa spins on her heel to take in the small horde of advancing creatures. Their fat bodies exposed to the dim light of the cavern and only a tiny strip of cloth hangs around their waist giving them the smallest form of modesty.

The oily creatures chuckle as they circle around us, showing their sharp little teeth and wrinkling their tiny snouts as they barely contain their mirth at having separated our group.

They all carry spiked clubs, their heavily muscled arms well suited to the weapon. I have seen goblins wield weapons like this before with devastating consequences.

I count them, ten in total. Five each for Lexa and me.

The goblins click to one another, using a language I don't understand. I grip my sword. I don't like our chances but going with them alive is undoubtedly the worse option.

I glance at Lexa, and she looks at me, a grim expression on her face.

"Guys are you okay?" Tash's voice comes from the other side of the rock wall behind us.

"What is that clicking?" Melissa calls out.

I swallow and call back, "The goblins who caused the rockslide are here to try and claim their prize."

"Goblins!" Nathaniel's voice thunders from the other side of the rock wall. His voice is so frightening the goblins take a step back and peer through the settling dust.

Rocks start to slide behind us, and I know the others are trying to get over the wall to come to our aid. I know it is futile. They separated our group for a reason. Goblins are very intelligent, the only thing that beats out their intelligence is their greed.

The fattest goblin laughs as it confirms all our help is on the other end of the landslide. His pale green rolls jostle about creating a wave of fat as the goblin shares his mirth with the group. It doesn't take long for the others to join in, all of them laughing stupidly.

I grip my sword and ready my stance. The goblins' laughter abruptly stops. "Dere be no sense in fighting us." He squeaks out in heavily accented Kateran. "Dis be one fight you can't win 1408."

My heart thuds in my chest. How can these goblins know who I am?

The largest goblin steps forward and shows his sharp teeth in what I suppose is meant to be a grin. “Do you know how big da reward be to bring you alive to our lord Darkmor?”

I sigh, I should have known he wouldn’t just let me go. After the army he sent into the rebel camp I should have realized he wouldn’t just give up, I just wish I knew why he wanted me so desperately.

“Claire and Lexa get as close as you can to the wall.” Nathaniel's voice roars.

Lexa and I obey the command and dash towards the wall as rocks sail over it and fall randomly, some striking the goblins who bellow in rage.

One goblin takes a rock to the side of his head and collapses to the ground unmoving. His club still clutched in his hand and his tiny brown eyes staring lifelessly in our direction. A small trickle of yellow liquid oozes from his head wound.

Small explosions come from the other side of the rock wall, and I recall the tiny explosives Lucas and Tash have on them.

I look at the rock wall behind us, hope starting to fill me for the first time since the goblins arrived.

“Cover your eyes.” Tash bellows moments before an explosion causes the rock wall behind me to vibrate. “It’s working!” Tash’s voice cries.

The lead goblin whistles as more rocks sail over the wall to assault them, keeping the goblins away from us for as long as possible.

Out of the woods run three brown beetles. These bugs are so big I could ride one if I wanted to. Their six hairy legs rush towards us as their huge glassy eyes seek out the lead goblin. They rush towards him, and he points at us and whistles once more, this time at a different pitch. The bugs seem to cringe at the sound, and they squirm while the lead goblin makes it.

The goblins all pull unusual masks from bags that hang from their loincloth belts and put them over their face and long ears. The effect is more frightening than I could have imagined, they give the goblins an extra-long snout and large black eyes.

The bugs scuttle around and turn their backs to us, lifting their beetle wings they spray a cloud of yellow liquid. The gas disperses and covers us, a large portion of it drifting over the rocks. The gas smells sickeningly sweet and tastes bitter.

The explosions behind us stop, and Nathaniel bellows. "Cover your faces." A loud burst of coughing comes from behind us. "It's sleeping gas." Nathaniel struggles out in a weaker voice than before.

I pull my shirt over my face, but it is too late, I can already feel the heaviness in my limbs. The goblins march over to us, one grabs my foot, and I slash at it with my sword.

I am rewarded with a high-pitched cry.

"Idiots," The lead goblin screams. "Wait til dey be asleep."

I stare at them as my vision starts to fade. One of the goblins points to Lexa. "What do we do with her?"

The lead goblin releases a wicked smile. "Bring her, I think the boys have earned themselves some fun before dinner."

Lexa stiffens next to me, and I crawl towards her putting myself between her and the goblins. Each movement is painfully slow, the goblins roar in laughter at my gesture.

I try to lift my sword, but it's too heavy, and I collapse in the dust. My body betrays me as the gas takes complete control.

I awake to uncomfortable jostling. My head and neck bump painfully against dirt and rock, I glance up to find my feet bound and attached to the back of a beetle.

I drop my head back on the ground, and it bumps over rocks and lumps of dirt as I am dragged along. I try to pull my shirt closer to my back, so it stops filling with dirt and rocks, which have worked their way between the cloth and my skin with the movement.

I fumble, but the task is made even more difficult by bound hands. I give up and just accept all the small cuts and grazes I am going to have and from the feel of it, I already have a few anyway.

I turn my head to find Lexa unconscious and in the same position as I am. Something moves across my stomach, and I look to find my necklace has crept out of my pocket and rests against the skin of my abdomen, the metal chain the only thing keeping the necklace inside my pocket. Panicking, I grab the gem and stuff it back into the concealed pouch underneath the lining of my pants.

That's when I realize everything else has been removed from me, my belt pouches and my weapons. Luckily my necklace had been in the secret pocket I had sewn into my pants after the elders had given them to me.

I glance over at Lexa, her weapons and pouches are gone too. So is her necklace.

The goblins ahead of us talk and laugh loudly, clapping each other on the back and offering congratulations for a job well done.

“We gonna be rich boys!” The lead goblin cries.

The rest nod in agreement, one perks up and asks, “Gremunt, why do ya think lord Darkmor is offer’n ten thousand gold coins for a scrawny human, like dat?”

The lead goblin places his hands on his ample hips. “Now Grintus, you know better dan to be asken questions like dat,” the leader squeaks back. “But me third cousin is in da know you sees, he be inside our lord Darkmor’s inner circle.

“He says, the magic in the cavern be fading and our lord Darkmor needs da girl for some ritual to restore it,” the pale green goblin reveals.

“Da magic in the cavern be fading?” Grintus asks looking at the high roof above us.

The lead goblin, Gremunt touches his nose. “Dat’s what me cousin be say’n. He says dat’s why da ground be shaking.”

An old blood red goblin pipes up. “Me fourth mates cave come down in dat last ground shake, it did. Now she be living with me first mate, and I be sure I will come home one day to discover I has one mate less.”

The goblins all laugh at his tale and settle into silence. The smallest goblin slows down and slowly makes his way towards me and the still unconscious Lexa.

The leader turns around and snaps, “Geenub what you be doing?”

The small brown-red goblin starts. “I just be check’n on da prisoners.”

The fat leader eyes him. “You know dey be sleeping for the next few hours, after a dose of sleeping gas like dat.”

The small goblin nods and hurries to re-join his companions. I twist in my ropes to see if I can wriggle free, but these goblins sure do know their knots. I look over at the unconscious Lexa and watch as her long hair tangles with itself across the rocks and sticks as she is dragged beside me.

Maybe she got a larger dose of the sleeping gas than I did. Although, the lead goblin seems to think I should be still out of it too. I will have time to worry about that later, for now, I have an unwatched window in which to figure out an escape.

Quietly I bend my body and try to reach for the ropes that bind my feet, but the uneven ground spins me around and bumps me about in such a way that makes the task basically impossible. I flop back and let out a long slow breath, this isn't going to work.

I lean to the side and snag a rock as I go past it. It is rounded and useless, I drop it and try for another. The second rock I pick up is much better, the long edge is quite sharp. I bend my right hand into an awkward position and painfully begin to saw my way through the thick rope that binds my wrists.

It takes an uncomfortably long time, and when I chance a look, I have only sawed through about an eighth of the way. This will work, but I need time.

The giant brown beetle in front of me slows to a stop, and I quickly tuck my rock inside my hands and do my best to lay limply.

I sneak a look through my eyelashes and find us in front of a large cave, judging from the stink of overcooked meat, this is where the goblin's nest.

The goblins stomp up beside Lexa and myself, unhook our bonds from the beetles. Two of the monstrous goblins take our ropes and drag us towards the entrance of the cave. Somehow the last few meters to the cave is the roughest. It is amazing to think the beetles were gentler.

Inside the cave, the overwhelming stench of meat fills my nose, the only other scent to make it past the meat is the smell of fire. I watch through my eyelashes as we pass by three small fires inside the cave before we come up to a row of white cages. All of them are full except one.

The old blood red goblin turns to the leader. "We only maked one crate."

The leader narrows his eyes. "We be only expecting to bring one. They little, put dem in the same cage, while dey be sleeping dey will do little damage."

Lexa and I are crammed into the small enclosure, and the leader locks the door with a key, that's when I spot Lexa's necklace hanging from his many-chinned neck.

The goblin saunters away, followed by his tribe of minions. I let out a slow breath and nudge Lexa who is still entirely out of it, surely Lexa didn't breathe in that much more gas than I did.

I pull the rock out and resume sawing at my bonds while watching the goblins settle around the fire, where a big chunk of something that looks very human is roasting slowly over a spit.

I grit my teeth. We must get out of here before they decide Lexa is their next meal. It seems like I have a free pass being Darkmor's most wanted, but I don't think that courtesy will extend to Lexa.

I glance over at a nearby table. Many leather straps are attached to the worn wood to help hold victims down, rusted, and dirty tools are displayed on the wall across from us. Splatters of dark brown and red are scattered over the walls and tools still have lumps of flesh. I focus on the nearest pair of pliers and spot a whole fingernail hanging from the skin there.

I bite back the rise of bile in my throat and slow my breathing. I will kill us both before I let that happen to either of us.

I look down at my bonds to find I have sawed almost all the way through. I give it an experimental tug, and a few of the bonds holding the rope together snap and the cable sags around my wrists. I leave the last few strings intact, a sleeping prisoner with missing restraints will probably be suspicious enough to warrant investigation.

I lean over and pull Lexa's hands towards me and begin sawing my way through her bonds.

I leave her bonds in the same state as mine and begin the difficult task of sawing through the ropes that bind our feet. Luckily these were just attached to drag us places, so I only have to cut through a single loop of rope.

Now that our bonds are almost broken I drop the rock and rub my sore hand. Cutting through the rope with a sharp stone isn't an easy task and my tender wrist screams in protest at the slightest movement.

I turn to Lexa and try to wake her again. There is no point trying to make an escape while she is sleeping, if I try to drag her out of here, we will certainly get caught. And leaving her here is not an option.

I eye the heavily sleeping woman. What is the difference between the two of us? What happened differently that makes Lexa remain sleeping?

I go through the encounter in my head from the moment the goblins had shown up until now. The only thing I can think of is I still have my necklace, which is absurd. The magic in the necklaces can't be healing, or Lexa's wounds wouldn't have taken so long to recover after the dogs.

I rub my face with my hands and notice the cuts on my arms from my tumble down the pile of rocks. All of them have scabbed over and are itchy, absently I scratch at one and the scab falls off, revealing pink healed skin underneath.

I stare at the skin in surprise. Either I was asleep for a really long time, or I healed really fast.

Cautiously, I pull my necklace from my hidden pocket and hold it in my hand. When I awoke this was on my stomach, could it be that the necklace healed me?

Experimentally, I put the crystal in Lexa's hand and fit mine over the top of hers. Nothing happens, and I sigh to myself, it had been a desperate thought.

Just then a blue light shines brightly through our fingers, and I hasten to cover the gaps with my other hand and my legs. Panicking I look over at the goblins, but all of them have their backs to us, and the leader is waving around a hunk of meat as he shares a story with the group around him.

A blue line splits through my arm, and I bite on my lip to stifle the pained groan. I pull my sleeve down, so it covers the newly emerged magic wound. The material presses against the blue line and agony flares through my body, but at least the jacket dulls the light coming from it. I quickly put my hand back over Lexa's and desperately hope she wakes up soon.

Slowly the woman begins to stir, and I keep my hands in place until her eyelids flutter open. I drop the crystal in the dust and clamp my hand over her mouth as she opens it.

Green eyes fix on mine as Lexa's breathing begins to steady. Slowly I pull my hands from her face and give her a weak smile as I put my necklace back into my pocket. I nod my head slowly towards the goblins by the fire and Lexa shifts to take in the situation.

Her eyes dart over to the table I had spotted earlier, and her breath catches.

I put my hand on hers and give it a gentle squeeze. Slowly I shift towards Lexa and whisper into her ear. "I don't know how long we have till they come back for us. They think we should remain sleeping for at least a little longer, but the crystal woke us. I have cut through our bindings, and only a few threads hold them together."

Lexa nods slightly at my recount. I take a breath preparing to tell Lexa the hardest part of all. “They took all our belongings, and the leader has your necklace.”

Lexa's hand squeezes mine, and I have to stifle a yelp, I squeeze back until she loosens her grip.

For the first time, I study the cage we are in. I inspect the bar I had been resting against, and suspicion rises in me, blackened sections of the cage look almost fire burnt. My eyes flick to the slowly roasting body above the flames in front of the feasting goblins.

Bones. The cages are made from bones.

As disgusting as it is, I must give it to the goblins, if anything, it would seem they are resourceful. I study the joins, and they appear to be lashed together with a hard yellow fiber.

I point it out to Lexa, she scrutinizes it and glances over at me. “It looks like sinew.”

“Can we cut it?” I whisper and hold up my blunted rock.

Lexa shakes her head. “Sinew is very tough, about the only thing that will work to loosen this is moisture.”

I lift my fingers to the material and pull at it with my fingers, I can't even get a fingernail between it and the bone it is resting on.

I let out a small huff. “It sure is wound tight.”

Lexa shakes her head and begins tugging on bones to see if any give way. “Sinew shrinks when it dries, it is advantageous material.”

I pick up my rock and try to saw at it, but the way the cord is tied to the bone makes it basically impossible to get the stone where I need it. I try a different join with the same result, sighing I drop the rock and rub my face.

Lexa slowly rolls over, so her back faces me, and I hear gentle clinking. I peek over to see her fiddling with the lock through the bars.

She turns her head back to me. “If we can find something narrow and sturdy, I can pick this lock.

As carefully as we can, we search the floor of our cage and as far out as we can reach through the bars. But the surface is clean, someone had swept this site to ensure there was nothing of use in here to aid escaping prisoners.

I drop my head back on the bars behind me, and something stabs my ear. I turn slowly to eye a charred section of the bone where it has cracked

a little, I lift my bound hands and with great difficulty wedge my fingernail in the crack and begin to pry the bone loose.

My fingernail bends back, and I bite my lip at the unpleasant feeling, I continue my work until I have freed a thin sliver about as long as my finger.

I turn slowly and hold it out to Lexa. Gently she takes the bone slip from my fingers and tests its strength, she looks up at me, and I see hope in her eyes. "This will work."

The goblins by the fire begin screaming and shouting at one another. Some sort of drink slushed around and spills all over the floor from massive cups they grip in their fat oily hands.

The leader, Gremunt, pushes the small yellow goblin. "Just go see if dey be awake yet!"

The small yellow goblin yelps and scampers towards us. Lexa tucks the bone shard into her sleeve, and I push the rock to the other side of the cage bars, hoping it remains hidden in the shadows.

The vomit yellow goblin approaches and peers through the bars. His breath stinks like rotten meat, and he extends a long claw-like finger through the bars to poke at my leg.

I clench my jaw and do my best to keep from moving as he presses the jagged fingernail into my skin. I feel the moment it breaks the barrier and the slow trickle of blood that runs down my leg.

He retrieves his finger and turns back to his goblin party. "Dey still be sleeping," he bellows.

I open my eyes a crack and watch as the lead goblin gets up and stumbles over. "It won't be long now. Dey should be waking any moment now, den we can has our funs with dem."

The brown-red goblin points at Lexa. "Can me plays with her?"

The leader goblin raises his eyebrows. "She be so skinny, and ugly too. Why would you want dat for your goblinhood?"

The brown-red goblin shrugs. "Dey be so weak and defenseless it makes me feel big and powerful."

The other goblins take a moment to process his words, and slowly they begin to nod in agreement. Lexa's hand grips mine and anger surges through me at the words.

The leader goblin turns back to the cage and rubs his chins. "Me suppose once you be done, we can still put her on da table."

The other goblins nod eagerly. The leader goblin moves towards the lock, adrenaline rises through me all thoughts of pretending to be asleep fly from my mind. I kick viciously at the cage, and the bone bars shudder, Lexa starts violently at my movement.

The leader goblin hastily steps back. "Oh, me see you be awake now. Just in time to enjoys da fun."

My thoughts race desperately, and an idea clicks into place. I kick viciously at the cage again and I bellow, "You wouldn't be speaking like that if I had my magic berries!"

That stumped the goblin, he pauses to look at his comrades. "Magic berries?"

"Yes," I bellow kicking at the cage again, being careful not to break the last few strips holding the binding on my feet together. "They make anyone who eats them ten times stronger and superfast," I scream.

Lexa looks at me in alarm. She must think I have lost it, but her look of distress is only helping to support my performance to the goblins.

"Dey make me stronger?" the leader repeats.

The other goblins nod. "And fast," one adds.

The vomit yellow goblin grins. "Dis must be why Lord Darkmor wants her."

The goblin pauses and a small smile crawling onto his greasy features. "Da money be for da girl, not da berries," the lead goblin answers slowly. "So, we take berries!"

"No," I yell. "Those berries are super rare, and I won't tell you where they are!"

The goblins chuckle. "We has ways of making people tell, but first we check through your bags."

"No," I yell again, making a big scene of crawling to the bars as the goblins began to rifle through our belongings.

Lexa crawls up beside me and whispers, "What are you doing?"

I give her a small smile. "Remember the berries from the cave that we thought were Elmaras? I picked some and put them in my bag before we realized what they did, I never got around to taking them out."

Lexa's eyes widen in surprise, I turn away from her to watch the smallest goblin hold the bag up with the bunch of fruit in it.

He waves it about with pride. "Me finds it me did!"

The leader snatches it from his hand and stomps over to me dragging his club on the ground behind him.

He waves the bag in my face. "Be dese your berries?" he taunts.

"No," I sniffle.

The goblin gives me a grin. "Me dinks dey are."

The other goblins crowd around the cage rubbing their hands eagerly. "Let's eat dem," the vomit yellow goblin cries.

I make a show of swallowing. "There isn't enough for you all."

The leader turns his wrinkled snout to me. "What?"

I cringe back into the cage bars behind me. "There isn't enough for all of you," I repeat.

The goblins eye the bag in the leader's hand and then each other with suspicion.

Lexa adds in a small voice. "It will work the best on the strongest of you."

I look at Lexa. "Why would you tell them that? Now the strongest of them all will become the most powerful being in existence."

Lexa offers me a weak shrug. "Perhaps the most powerful will be lenient on me for sharing this information?"

The little red-brown goblin flexes his gigantic arm muscles. "We all know I be da strongest."

The lead goblin lets out a savage cry and smashes the small goblin in the face with this club. The little goblin flies backward and tumbles over a rock and out of sight, a pool of yellow blood seeps across the dirt where he lays still.

After that, an all-out fight erupts, and the goblins fight one another for the bag of 'magic' berries.

The leader takes out most of the group efficiently and he snaps the neck of the vomit yellow goblin and drops him to the floor at his feet. Silence fills the cave.

The large pale green goblin breathes heavily and gives us a hard stare as he scoops up the bag and stuffs the whole bunch of berries in his mouth. "Me be da strongest, and with da power of dese berries me will becomes more powerful den even Darkmor."

Lexa and I sit in silence stunned by the swift brutality that had taken place. The goblin finishes the berries and swallows them, following it with

a loud belch. He drops the almost empty bag to the floor with a clink and rolls his shoulders.

He gives us a grin and makes his way to the cage, adjusting his meager loincloth. He points at the body of the brown-red goblin. "Now me be seeing what Greenub means about using weak, defenseless humans to satisfy me goblinhood."

Lexa and I crawl as far back into the cage as we can as the large goblin fumbles with the lock.

"How long will it take for the berries to work?" Lexa cries.

I snap my rope bonds, there is no point keeping them on now, and I will need my hands and feet to fight. "I don't know, he is bigger than we are, it is hard to tell."

The goblin chuckles as he slips the key into the lock. "You be worried about me super strength. Me interested to see how dat works too."

He swings open the bone door and peers in with a grin reaching his large greasy hand into the cage. Lexa and I inch back into the corners of our tiny enclosure, it is no use, there is nowhere to go.

The goblin reaches in and grabs Lexa's ankle, his whole hand closing over her calf muscle. With a bellow I launch forward and kick his heavily muscled arm. The goblin bellows in rage and releases Lexa's calf, delivers a backhand to my head that has me seeing a burst of silver stars.

"Stay down," he roars. He returns his attention to Lexa and seizes her again, gripping her leg and pulling her. Lexa grabs onto the bone bars and kicks wildly until the goblin screams in rage.

I shake my head and resist the urge to vomit as I grab hold of Lexa's leg and help to pull her back inside the cage. Lexa launches forward and buries the bone shard into the hand of the goblin who howls in anger and snaps back his fist.

"Putting you humans in da same cage be a bad idea." He grumbles, flashing us a line of pointed teeth, suddenly he pauses, shakes his head, and lets out a large yawn.

"What da?" The goblin stutters as he struggles upright and staggers from side to side. He points at us accusingly. "You lied about da berries."

His legs give out from under him, and he collapses into a pile on the ground beside us. He struggles forward gasping as he turns to look at us, his dark black eyes condemning. His body lets out one final shudder as he rolls over to face the roof and lays still.

We scramble out of the cage, and I am quick to pull one of the disgusting knives from the torturer table and slowly approach the unconscious goblin. We pause just out of reach, and I observe him for signs of breathing. The creature's chest doesn't move.

"I think it's dead," I mumble and poke it in the leg with the tip of the rusted knife. The creature doesn't so much as stir.

Lexa breathes heavily, still recovering from the ordeal of what almost happened to her. "How can you be certain? The berries only put us to sleep."

I nod. "None of us ate an entire bunch, let alone all in one go."

I put my knife under Lexa's necklace and gently press it against the creature's throat just in case it is more alive than we think it is.

Lexa darts in and pulls the necklace off its neck and quickly stuffs it into one of her pockets.

I look over the other creatures trapped in cages throughout the room. I grab the key from the lock in our enclosure and together we set about releasing the animals who are quick to flee out of the cave and into the darkness of the cavern beyond.

Chapter Twenty-two

I head over to the fire and collect our scattered belongings. Amongst them I find a stretched dried hide with a picture of my face burnt on it and the number '1408' scribbled under the words 'Reward 10,000 gold coins.'

I study my drawn face, they matched the color and length of my hair. My features are startlingly similar, even right down to the scar through my eyebrow that I had encountered from my last arena fight. I lift my hand to my face and run my finger along the old injury, in a few years it might fade, but I doubt the hair in my eyebrow will ever grow back through the scar tissue.

I hand it to Lexa who inspects the grimy leather. "Well, at least we know how they figured out who you were."

I nod and toss the leather into the fire and watch as the dying embers, slowly consume the words and the illustration of me. I crinkle my nose as the sour smell reaches me.

Lexa straps her belongings back to her belt. "This will make traveling more difficult. 10,000 gold pieces will be tempting for most creatures." She approaches me and inspects my features. "We could change how you look a little."

I gape at her. "How?"

Lexa indicates at the fire. "The picture shows you with very long brown hair, use charcoal to dye it black."

I reach up to touch my hair. "Do you think it will make much of a difference?"

Lexa bites her lip and studies my face. "I think it will make enough of a difference so that people who aren't specifically after you will not realize."

I take a deep breath and move to the other side of the fire, away from the dead goblins. "Let's collect our stuff and head out of here, whoever was coming here to get me may arrive at any moment."

Lexa nods, and we gather our things, and Lexa drops one end of a torch in the fire. "Okay let's go."

Wearily we sidestep the dead bodies and the puddles of sticky yellow blood that oozed from them as we head for the cave exit.

We enter the cavern, and I notice the bug things that had dragged us here lashed to a large stalagmite. The heavy rope cut brutally into the flesh around the creatures' necks. I draw my sword and walk over to them. "I am going to set you free, don't use your sleeping gas on me, okay?"

I slide my sword through the ropes binding them. The bugs' glittery eyes focus on me for a minute, and slowly it nudges its large head against my body.

Awkwardly I pat the top of its head. "It's okay little buddy, you're welcome."

The creatures slowly back away and together they skitter into the stunted trees and out of sight.

Lexa comes to stand beside me. "I think you made a friend."

I give her a weak smile. "I hope they have better luck than they have had in the past."

Together we walk down the hill and away from the carnage of the cave behind us. Lexa indicates a worn path leading to the cave. "Anyone heading here will likely follow that path, we should move into the trees and try to find cover to make alterations to your appearance."

I eye the worn path as we step away from it and into the sparse trees. "If we lose this path, how will we find the others?"

Lexa glances back at me as she moves aside to avoid a ring of mushrooms. "It is far more likely our attempts at finding them would only prolong the search. The goblins made no effort to cover their tracks and Melissa will make quick work of them. It would be prudent to alter your appearance sooner rather than later, we have time now and so we will use it."

I never thought it possible to temporarily alter a person's appearance without magic. My eyes flick up to watch Lexa's back as she dodges a tree, I have certainly experienced more things since leaving the compound than I thought I ever would.

Lexa leads us around a large rock. "I think here is a good place, this rock should shield the fire from the view of the road, and we are far enough away that we will not be heard."

I nod, and together we start gathering fallen bark from the balooga trees for the fire, Lexa uses a small, sturdy stick to dig a hole. She places the largest of our branches inside it and packs the hole, so the small log stands on its own.

Slowly Lexa leans the other branches alongside it, she piles them thickest to thinnest working outwards, stuffing dried leaves in gaps as she goes. We mix balooga water with dirt and apply the mud to the outside of the mound until all, but nine holes are filled—eight at the bottom and one at the top in the center.

Lexa sits back on her heels and washes her hands with the water flowing from a punctured balooga tree. “Usually when we make charcoal, we make it on a much larger scale than this, but we only need enough to keep your hair dyed, we will have to make more when we run out. One of the shortfalls of charcoal is that it is not easily transported, and unless it is properly cared for, it will become useless,” Lexa explains as she shakes her hands dry.

She returns to the small mound and carefully lights a fire at the top of the hole and uses small amounts of balooga leaves to keep it going. It isn’t long before the furnace is blazing and kicking out a surprising amount of heat.

Lexa sits back and rubs her shoulder. “This will take a few hours to make and cool, we will probably be here for the night.”

My stomach rumbles and Lexa chuckles. “I guess we should try to find some food.”

I look up at the balooga trees. “Maybe we can find more of those seeds?”

Lexa climbs to her feet and holds her hand out for me. “We won’t know unless we look.”

A short while later we return to the furnace with a balooga seed, a cluster of cavern mushrooms and a medium sized lizard Lexa had caught.

I set about building another fire, this time for cooking. Lexa heads over to check on the furnace, she plugs each of the holes with mud.

Lexa washes her hands as I set a large flat rock on our small cooking fire, the furnace fire would just obliterate anything we tried to cook on it and wait for the new smaller fire to heat up. I turn to Lexa. “Why did you cover the holes with mud?”

Lexa wipes her face with the back of her hand and leaves a small streak of mud across her cheek. “We need the fire to starve, so the charcoal is not compromised. We should be able to retrieve it in the next few hours.”

I smile at her and lean forward to wipe the streak of mud off her face with my thumb. “How sure are you that it will change the color of my hair?”

Lexa seems lost for a moment before replying. “I have never used it on hair, but I have seen charcoal used many times to change the color of clothing and as paints. I believe as long as you don’t get your hair wet it should take at least a few days to come out.”

I take my knife and begin scooping the meat from the balooga seed and placing it on the hot rock, it comes out in small uneven chunks. I can’t help but feel Lucas had made it look much simpler than this, but I persist and the meat sizzles pleasantly with each addition of white flesh. Lexa expertly prepares the lizard and slowly roasts the mushrooms in the fire alongside it.

Before long we are both enjoying a pleasant, if quiet, meal. I finish the last of my food and set down the rock I had been using as a plate. “It feels weird without the others here.”

“It seems, I have also grown accustomed to traveling in a large group and all the noise that brings,” Lexa agrees as she too, sets down her makeshift plate.

“Do you think the others are okay?” I ask.

Lexa looks at me. “I am sure they are, each of them is extremely capable, and together there is much they can overcome.”

I hold my hands out to the fire. “I suppose they weren’t kidnapped by goblins.”

“That is true,” Lexa replies as she places a wide piece of bark into the fire and sits back on her heels.

I pull my hair free from its tie and attach it to my wrist. “Do you think all this will help prevent others from identifying me so quickly?”

Lexa’s eyes linger on the freshly freed hair and pokes the fire with a short stick. “You have some distinctive features that will be difficult to hide from bounty hunters, but this should stop regular creatures and humans from recognizing you.”

I eye the furnace. “Surely changing the color of my hair will not be enough?”

Lexa shakes her head, “Probably not, you tend to wear your hair in a high tail, even the representation of you showed that. If we braid your hair

and leave most of it down, it should change your initial appearance, at least for those who do not know you well.”

We settle into silence and mostly I just watch the fire crackle, Lexa shifts beside me and says, “Earlier in the prison, you said the crystal woke me?”

I lift my hand to where the necklace is hidden in its secret pocket. “Yes, I don’t know how only that I woke before you and some my wounds were healed. The only reason I could think of why it happened to me and not you is because I still had my necklace. When I put it into your hand, it shone brightly, and you awoke.”

Lexa puts down her stick and brushes off her hands. “May I look at your newly healed wounds?”

Surprised, I hold out my arm, and Lexa carefully takes it in her hands, inspecting the pink skin.

Lexa inspects my cuts, her hands gently running along the length of my forearm. “These are the wounds you got from the landslide?”

I turn back to the fire and try to concentrate on anything except the way Lexa's hands seem to create a wave tingling along the length of my arm all the way to my belly.

I clear my throat. “They are, when I awoke, I didn’t have any magical injuries that I could see, but when I used the crystal to wake you, I got this.”

I gently pull my arm from her hands and lift my sleeve and show her the long blue line.

Lexa's eyebrows furrow. “It would seem there is a different impact for magic used subconsciously as opposed to magic used deliberately.”

I pull my sleeve down to help mute the blue light, and I rub over the sore spot as the fabric agitates it. “It would help a lot if there was someone who actually understood this, instead of us just figuring it out as we go.”

Lexa reclaims her stick and pokes at the fire. “There is no sense wishing for things we do not currently have. What we have now is time, and we should use it to rest. You sleep first, I will keep watch.”

I awake to find Lexa patiently crushing charcoal in a makeshift bowl with a rounded rock—most of it is already a fine powder. I rub my eyes and lean forward to pick up the last stick of charcoal, and it takes a

surprising amount of strength to snap it. I look over at Lexa's black powder, she must have been working on that for ages.

Lexa looks up at me with a smile. "I see you are awake."

I yawn and stretch. "That I am." I eye the broken balooga seeds next to Lexa and notice the way the flesh has been squeezed. I point at it. "What happened to that?"

Lexa pauses to follow my finger. "I squeezed the raw flesh to get out the oils, we will need it for the charcoal paste."

I leave the camp and walk a polite distance to relieve myself. When I return, Lexa has mixed the charcoal with the oil to make a rather impressive black paste.

I sit in front of her, and Lexa begins working it through my hair taking care to spread it evenly. I close my eyes at the pleasant sensation. I cannot remember the last time someone touched my hair like this. Once all the charcoal is gone, she begins to braid my hair tightly from both sides and weaves it together at the back.

She ties them together with small lengths of sinew Lexa kept in a small pouch on her belt for her own hair. "These hair ties should not come out unless they get wet, in which case you will probably lose the dye too."

I nod as Lexa's hands drop into her lap and I turn to face her. "So, no long baths then?"

She gives me a small smile and reaches forward to tuck some of my more willful hairs behind my ear. "I am afraid they are out of the question."

I detect the way her voice has deepened, and my eyes dart to her lips as if that will somehow provide answers. For a moment we sit close to one another. My heart thuds in my chest as I try to understand the impulse I have to lean forward.

"What did I tell you?" a voice breaks through the silence. "I knew I could find these two before Nathaniel."

I jerk away from Lexa and spin towards the voice to find Melissa marching her way towards us, Melissa gives us a wave and turns back to face the others. "Tash you won't believe it, they really have been braiding each other's hair."

Tash's footsteps crash through the undergrowth, and she comes to stand beside Melissa gaping at us.

I turn back to Lexa. "I don't understand."

Lexa wipes her black hands and a wad of dried grass she has beside her. “Back in the rebel camp, young girls would often spend the night at each other’s house. Usually, they would do something with the other's hair during that time. Hence the comment.”

I nod and turn back to the other two. Melissa whistles. “Wow Claire, looking good, that hairstyle is badass.”

Tash comes closer to inspect my hair. “I like it, but why did you change the color?”

Lexa rises to her feet. “After we escaped the goblin lair, we discovered that a bounty has been placed on Claire, and images that represent her are being distributed. The goblins had one.”

“Yeah,” says Tash. “We followed the tracks there first. Did you two make that mess?”

I shrug. “Yes, and no.” She looks at me, but I don’t offer anymore. I don’t feel like relieving those moments quite so soon. I shudder as my thoughts glance over what almost happened to Lexa. Tash watches me for a moment and lets it go.

“Ooh a bounty, how much?” Melissa asks as she unties a water canteen attached to her belt and takes a sip.

Lexa holds out a black hand to me, and I take it, she turns to Melissa. “Ten thousand gold coins.”

Melissa chokes on her water and Tash slaps her on the back. “Ten thousand gold coins?” Melissa splutters. “Are you sure?”

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “I read the wanted sheet myself.”

Melissa wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and looks directly at me. “Everything that knows the meaning of gold coin will be looking for you.”

I give her a weak smile and point at my hair. “That’s why we were hair braiding.”

Melissa looks over my shoulder at Lexa. “It was a good idea, have you thought about the scar that runs through her eyebrow?”

Lexa shakes her head. “I have, but this type of thing has never been a specialty of mine.”

I look behind Tash. “Where are the others?”

Melissa waves her hand dismissively. “We split up to look for you, we are supposed to meet back at the weird rock in three hours.”

“Two now,” Tash pipes in.

Melissa starts towards me. “Good, that gives us an hour. Do you have any more of that charcoal?”

An hour later we march out of our little campsite, following Tash and Melissa towards what they have dubbed ‘the weird rock.’ Melissa had drawn in some of my eyebrow with charcoal, covering the scar that runs through it, making it less noticeable. Tash had collected some dirt similar to my skin color and showed me how to make it a paste and how to apply it over the rest of the scar.

It wasn’t perfect, and anyone who looked too closely would notice something amiss, but from a distance, the group of women assured me I could be easily mistaken for someone else.

So, now in a small pouch that hung from my belt are all the necessary materials for my disguise. Aside from my hair braids, I don’t like the changes, the charcoal itches and the dirt paste has to be reapplied regularly. It is all very tedious.

I look at the others, they have done a lot to help me, I should be grateful.

I walk behind the group and pull the necklace from the pocket in my pants, twirling it in my fingers as Melissa fills Lexa in on everything she has missed during our forced separation.

I hadn’t had a chance to tell Lexa what the goblins said about the magic of the cavern failing. I am not sure if I believe it myself, it could just be the random bragging of a goblin claiming to know more than he does, which is quite common.

But there are elements to his story that make me wonder, and not for the first time, how a cavern as big and vast as Shadowsoul could exist.

The roof in places is so high it can’t be seen. I have traveled a fair distance, and in that time, I have only seen two potential sites for columns that usually provided support to a cave. The mountains at the rebel base and the mountain near the pass where Lexa and I were captured.

Surely, they are too far apart to hold up a cavern this large. Is it possible this place was created and supported by magic? If so, then by whom? If it was Darkmor, certainly he must be able to fix it himself, he wouldn’t need me for some ritual.

That must mean this place was created by someone else, a greater sorcerer than perhaps even Darkmor. My musing only leads me to more

involved questions and even fewer answers.

I have finally resolved to tell Lexa when Melissa announces, “The weird rock is just around this cluster of trees.”

We wind our way around the group, and I get my first look at this weird rock, my immediate reaction is an agreement with their chosen name.

The rock is vibrantly orange, almost the color of rust, and easily twice as tall as me. The whole thing is shaped like a screaming face. One eye is carved into the rock face boasting a large pupil and a shallow hole, the eye on the right side is significantly smaller and the hole is much deeper.

I gape at the confusing image before me. “How could that possibly be natural?”

Lexa puts her hand on my lower back, and I fight the surprising desire to lean into it as Lexa gently guides me towards the rock. “Erosion perhaps?”

Melissa shakes her head. “Nope, something carved it this way.” She points to a series of deep ridges around the eyes and mouth of the rock. “These marks were made by tools.”

I move closer to the rock and inspect the deep ridges, looking up at the horrifying face. It seems oddly familiar. Turning my head to the side, I study it from a different angle.

“Claire, what are you doing?” Tash queries coming to stand next to me.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. Something about this seems familiar.”

Melissa snorts and twirls a knife in her hand. “Have you seen many people with jagged teeth and uneven eyes lately?”

Melissa's words jolt a memory, and eagerly I dig through the small pouches attached to my belt. I unloop the bag that had housed the fake Elmaras, hiding the rings and coins from the greedy goblins.

I rummage through the pink stained bag and pull out a small, tattered piece of leather and hold it up to the rock. The twisted faces definitely match.

Tash leans over and compares the two. “Weird. They match.”

Lexa comes to stand beside me, and she too looks between the rock and the drawing in my hand. “Where did you get this?”

I hand the square of leather over. "It was in the pouch with the coins and the rest of the things we found with the skeletons in the cave."

Lexa turns the square over and squints. "There are words here." She holds the strip up to the light of the flaming torch Tash is holding and Lexa reads out, "Choose right."

I wait, but nothing further comes. "What is right?"

Lexa raises her eyebrow. "That is all that is here."

Melissa takes the square from Lexa to inspect it herself. "What is the point of going to all this trouble to say something meaningless?"

Lexa approaches the large rock. "It was not meaningless to them. This note was placed into the same pouch as their mating rings and their last remnants of home. This note holds significance, we just need to figure out how."

Tash paces back and forth. "Okay. Well, do they want us to do what is right?"

Melissa shakes her head and joins in. "It's too ambiguous, everyone has a different idea about what is right."

I am so focused on the pacing women that I don't realize what Lexa is doing until she is halfway up the rock. "Lexa," I call out. "What are you doing?"

She expertly scales the sheer rock and peers into the right eye of the face. "I believe the note was meant to be taken somewhat more literally than we first thought." She readjusts her grip, so one hand is free. "There is something in here."

Melissa shakes her head. "Don't put your arm in there Lexa, a hole that size could have any number of nasties inside it."

Lexa shakes her head. "I do not believe so." Without another word she shoves her arm in the hole. Her arm is buried right up to her armpit and tension pounds in my head.

Lexa tugs at something and huffs. "It is a tight fit."

After a few more moments of struggling Lexa manage to work her arm and a small wooden box free from the hole.

She easily scales back down the rock and jumps the last few meters. A wooden box clutched in her hand, intricate carvings twirl across the surface.

Lexa holds the item out for everyone to see. Slowly I take it from her hand and turn it in my fingers, there is a line across the surface and the

suggestion of hinges. I attempt to open the little box, but the lid holds fast.

When it doesn't budge, I take a closer look. "There is something written here."

"May I look?" Lexa asks. I nod and hand her back the box, Lexa peers at the writing. "When six become one, I come undone."

Melissa's eyes widen. "How do you make six become one?"

"By killing five," Nathaniel's deep voice rumbles from behind us.

Tash jumps. "Give us some warning instead of sneaking up on us like that." Nathaniel's cheeks darken slightly, and he gives a slight nod.

Lexa tucks the box into one of her pouches. "Surely the meaning is not one as crude as that."

Nathaniel shrugs. "That is the only way I can think to make six into one."

Lucas comes to stand beside me and pushes his glasses up his nose. "It looks like you found the missing portion of our party."

Melissa nods with pride. "Without your help, I might add."

Nathaniel's eyes narrow. "We found an illegal trader." He grins and adds, "Without your help, I might add."

Chapter Twenty-three

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “You actually found a quelton?”

Nathanial nods. “She is waiting by the side of the road up ahead for us.” He pauses and adds, “I’ll warn you now, she is a cranky old quelton, and she said we shouldn’t bother returning unless we could be sure we had something of interest for her.”

Lucas runs his hands through his hair. “She threatened to bite me when I asked her what she was willing to trade.”

Nathanial lets out a gruff bark of laughter. “Actually, the old fuzzball might not be that bad after all.”

I look between the faces of the group around me, everyone seems to follow Nathanial’s words just fine. I am still stuck back at what a quelton is, I guess I will find out soon enough.

Lexa pulls her leather shirt straight and brushes off some dirt. “What do we have of value?”

Melissa scrounges through a pocket. “I have the coins we took from the guard.”

“How many?” Lexa questions.

Melissa draws out her hand and reveals 10 gold coins and four silver coins. Lexa picks up a gold coinage and inspects it. “These will be of some value, but the exorbitant prices the trader will likely have will reduce the potential of these.

“The coins.” Nathanial and I say in unison.

The group looks at us like we are crazy, but I dig the coins out of my pocket and hold out three large silver coins engraved with the image of a phoenix and the word Solaris.

Lexa’s eyebrows furrow and Nathanial offers, “These coins are scarce, collectors will pay hundreds of gold coins just for one.”

Lexa smiles. “Excellent, at no point is the trader to know how many of these we have.” I nod and hand the bag over to Lexa.

Nathanial grunts in approval and leads us through the mass of balooga trees. We hike for almost fifteen minutes before we stumble across a road with three large, parked wagons and a group of humans.

I pull at my shirt as sweat dribbles down my neck, and I wipe my chin. “When did it become so hot?”

Melissa wipes her face beside me. "We have to be near a lava field."
"A lava field?" I question.

Lucas runs his hands through his hair. "Red hot liquid that will turn you into an overcooked pile of char that even a goblin would turn down."
"Oh."

Lexa gives me a small smile. "It is okay, they are still pretty far away."

I glance at the female humans off to the side of the road pointing to us. "How do you know?"

Lexa rolls her shoulder and loosens her leather vest revealing the dark blue tank top underneath and collar bones I have far too much interest in. "Because the temperature is still bearable."

I reach for Lexa's hand, and the woman turns to face me. "Maybe I should stay here?"

Lexa looks over my appearance. "You should come, this will be an excellent test run to see if anyone is familiar with you. Besides, bartering with traders is a skill you should learn if you are going to stay with the rebels once this is all over."

My heart thuds in my chest, I had never considered I could make a home amongst the rebels. "And what happens if they recognize me?"

Melissa leans over. "It is doubtful that these people have ever been to the capital. It is true they have handed out flyers, but it is unlikely the humans received one."

Lexa nods thoughtfully. "These people are probably on their way to or from a mandatory delivery of food and goods to a guard station, where the food will be assessed before it is escorted the rest of the way to Voltren."

Lexa catches a glimpse of my confused face and elaborates further, "Voltren is the capital of Shadowsoul."

I swallow. "What about the quelton?"

Tash fidgets beside us. "They definitely know the meaning of gold coin. Speaking of which, she is on her way."

Lexa shifts and meets my eyes. "Do not make eye contact and try to remain unnoticed."

I nod and casually work my way to the back of the group. A small creature approaches us, except for the face, palms, and feet it is covered all over in luscious silky black fur.

The quelton is about hip high with shrewd black eyes that glitter in the dim light of the cavern. She takes her time and stops in front of us with confidence.

She is so little. Should she not be afraid of what six large humans could do to overwhelm her? Instead, everyone around me seems to be nervously shifting about, even Nathaniel looks uncomfortable.

The only person projecting any sort of calm is Lexa, who steps forward to greet the creature with a bow and presents her open palms to the small quelton.

The quelton peers into Lexa's palms before offering her the same curtesy. Her small hairless snout sniffs the air before she announces, "I do not do real names. You may refer to me as Miss Q."

Lexa doesn't miss a beat. "You may refer to us as Reb."

The small creature bows her head. "What do you have to trade?"

Lexa pulls the gold coins and presents them. The quelton sniffs in disgust. "You stopped my travels for 10 gold coins?"

Lexa smiles and procures a silver coin of Solaris. "We also have this."

Miss Q perks up, profoundly interested in the coin Lexa is holding. "May I look?"

Lexa hesitates for a moment but hands the coin to Miss Q. "I believe in your honor."

The creature wriggles her snout in delight. "I see someone has taught you excellent manners."

Miss Q takes the coin, twirls it in her fingers and then gives it a bite, revealing a mouth of razor-sharp teeth. "This may be worth something." She mutters and hands the coin back to Lexa. "Let us see what we have to trade."

Miss Q leads us alongside the wagons, and I eye a huge creature taller than me standing placidly beside us, comfortably as wide as the wagon it pulled. Its broad square feet are flat, and each foot possesses six long toes, three at the front and three in the back. Its long flat head has two tiny round ears, twisting and swiveling, listening to the sounds around it.

I pause to study the creature as Miss Q leads Lexa and the others to the front of the wagon.

The giant beast looks at me with big brown eyes, which are nestled at each end of its long flat head. A row of long eyelashes surrounds each of

them, making the creature appear incredibly friendly if not slightly dopey. Its wide mouth is currently chewing on some kind of seed coming from the large open bag resting in front of it. It lets out a soft snort and swishes its tiny tail happily.

Smiling, I reach out to pet its large shoulder and find it covered in tiny grey bristles of hair. The massive creature slowly turns its head, so one of its big brown eyes focuses on me. It gazes at me for a moment before blinking and returning to its meal.

A small voice from my left says, "His name is Bruce."

I start and look left, spotting a little blonde girl with deep brown eyes, she appears to be about eight years old.

"And what is Bruce?" I ask smiling down at the child and glancing over at the beast.

"Bruce is a Tangera, and also my best friend." Announces the small girl proudly as she pets Bruce on the nose.

The Tangera snorts happily at the girl's attention, and he gently nudges his huge face into the girl's chest so she can hug him. His face is probably the only part of him the small girl can get her arms around.

"Jamie, it's time for supper," Calls a middle-aged woman with matching blonde hair, who is sitting across the road with another woman.

"Okay mum," The little girl calls and skips over to her mother.

Sweat runs across my brow, and I wipe it away and follow Lexa's lead by loosening my shirt for some air. I hurry to catch up, luckily it seems like no one has noticed my absence. Lexa looks over the goods Miss Q has spread out across the back of her wagon.

Lexa gestures to the items. "Four knapsacks, three water canteens, six blankets and a recent map of the underground for the coin."

Miss Q places her hand over her chest. "My dear you are robbing me with that deal."

Lexa gives her a knowing smile. "We both know how rare that coin is."

Miss Q drops all pretense and looks over the items Lexa has separated. "Three knapsacks, two water canteens, the blankets and I have a map out front."

Lexa considers the deal. "I would like to see the map first."

The quelton nods at one of the humans who jumps to her feet and runs to the front of the wagon, speedily returning with a rolled-up map. Miss Q

snatches it from her hands and presents it to Lexa for inspection.

The young woman looks to be around my age with long flowing brown hair and startling blue eyes. Her eyes scan each of us, I don't miss the way her eyes rake up and down Lexa's figure.

Lexa carefully inspects the map. "This will do." She looks up from the map and eyes the large creature one of the women is skinning and cutting into slices. "What is that?"

The quelton turns to look. "That was a large cave goat that I hunted."

Lexa nods. "Three gold pieces for six large slices."

Miss Q wiggles her snout, offers a stiff nod, and waves her hand at the young women standing behind her. "Deal."

The young woman with startling blue eyes darts across the road when the kettle by the fire releases a shrill whistle. I jolt back at the unexpected noise and reach for my sword before I realize what it is.

The quelton eyes me. "She is a twitchy one, isn't she?"

Lexa glances at me and nods. "They usually are the first time out."

The quelton lets out a sharp-toothed grin. "I am sure a capable woman like yourself will whip her into shape in no time." The quelton eyes Lexa. "Do we have a deal?"

Lexa looks over the items and offers her hands palm up. "We have a deal." The quelton is quick to place her palms over Lexa's while Melissa, Nathaniel, and Lucas stuff the purchased items into the backpacks and sling them onto their backs.

The beautiful young woman returns with a steaming mug of tea, her eyes again linger a little too long on Lexa. I grit my teeth. Miss Q takes the cup and points towards the skinned goat. "See that six large steaks are cut off that beast and prepared for our visitors."

The young woman bows her head, and she skitters over to relay the information. Lexa hands over the gold coins and the large silver piece.

The quelton is quick to slip the coins into a pouch hidden amongst her fur. "We are the last shipment, and the guards are not due for another two days. Would you care to have my girls cook your meal for you so you can remain for lunch?"

I study the way Lexa's shoulders tense at the suggestion. "You are most kind. Thank you for your offer-."

"Excellent," Miss Q cuts in, putting an abrupt end to Lexa's reply.

Lexa's jaw tenses. "Who are we to decline such welcome hospitality?"

I narrow my eyes. Lexa's body language and words don't line up, not to mention the way the rest of the group fidgets uncomfortably at our lunch invite.

Miss Q turns to the young women. "Arnita, come see that our guests are welcomed." The woman with bright blue eyes rises and makes her way over to the wagons, I eye her with distrust. The quelton turns to us. "I have some things to attend to, but I will join you shortly."

Lexa offers a small bow and presents her open hands once more, the quelton repeating the gesture.

The young woman from before, Arnita, approaches us and gives Lexa a large smile. "If you come this way we will prepare your food."

We head off across the road, Melissa mutters to Lucas behind me. "This quelton must be very rich to afford three personal slaves."

"They all look well fed too," Lucas adds.

We arrive at the campfire, which only makes the unbearable heat around us worse. The mother and daughter look warily at Nathaniel and move to the other side of the flames to resume butchering the cave goat.

I glance back at the wagon to find the quelton has vanished from sight. Arnita hurriedly hands everyone a cup of tea before basically sitting on top of Lexa and engaging her in conversation.

Nathaniel sits next to me, the tiny metal cup ridiculously small in his hand. "I don't like this."

Lexa lets out a small bout of laughter and Arnita places her hand on Lexa's forearm, I narrow my eyes. "Me either."

Tash leans in and smiles at me. "Smile Claire, we don't want them thinking we aren't happy with this arrangement."

Lucas lets out a nervous laugh beside me, and his forced smile looks a little maniacal. "Aren't happy? That quelton could be halfway to the nearest town already."

I pull my eyes away from Arnita and Lexa. "What do you mean? How close is the nearest town?"

Lucas holds his hands up. "Who knows? All I know is queltons are just about the fastest things in existence, and they have a temper to boot."

Melissa nods. "You should never cross a quelton." She points at the cave goat. "Just look at what she did to this poor creature."

I look up at the hanging carcass, and my eyes are drawn to deep lacerations around its throat and haunches. “Miss Q did that?”

Melissa takes a sip of her tea. “Miss Q probably did that in a good mood.”

I glance back at the carcass the woman and child are cutting into sections. “I don’t think I would like to see her mad.”

Nathanial shifts his massive bulk. “queltons make even me nervous.”

My eyes are drawn back to Lexa, and I turn just in time to see Arnita loosen the laces that hold her top together revealing an eye full of cleavage. “It certainly is hot near these lava fields. Have you seen them?”

Lexa sips from her tea and smiles at the woman. “I haven’t had the pleasure.”

I take a sip of my tea and glare at the woman as she speaks. “Oh, there are plenty of pleasurable things to do around here.”

I choke on the liquid and Melissa gives me a resounding whack on the back that helps to dislodge the tea from my airway.

Lexa looks over with concern. “Claire are you okay?”

Melissa grins at Lexa. “She is just choking on her drink, but she is fine now.”

I take in a gasp of air and nod my head, grateful for Melissa’s words. There is absolutely no way I could have spoken just yet with my body is 100% focused on regaining air.

Lexa gets up but is stopped by the young woman who takes hold of her hand. “I could show you the lava fields.”

“Arnita, leave our guests be.” Miss Q snaps as she marches into our sitting area.

Arnita drops her hand from Lexa’s and looks pleadingly at the quelton. “Can I have an afternoon pass?”

Miss Q assesses the woman before looking over Lexa. “You may have an hour if the woman is agreeable. At least this one cannot get you pregnant.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I watch Lexa consider the young woman. Lexa holds out her hand to the young woman who eagerly grasps it and climbs to her feet.

Lexa addresses her, “You are beautiful, but I do not wish to lay with you.”

Arnita snatches her hand away from Lexa, her eyes dart around the group and lock eyes with mine. The look is of pure hatred. Arnita lifts her lip and a snarl and stomps off into the stunted trees that surround us, disappearing into the dimness of the cavern.

Lexa rubs the back of her neck, Miss Q chuckles, “You are the first to turn her down in a long time.”

Lexa turns to face Miss Q. “I did not mean to offend.”

Miss Q sends Lexa a sharp-toothed grin. “You most certainly did not offend, in fact, it was the highlight of my afternoon, Arnita is willful and does not appreciate what is given to her.”

“She is treated better than most slaves,” I say without thinking. I stop myself from going any further, but I have already drawn attention to myself.

The quelton raises an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

I stare at the ground. Melissa nudges me with her elbow, and I swallow. “They are all extremely well cared for, clothed appropriately and allowed leave with permission.” My throat goes dry, and I force out the words. “You treat your investments well.”

The quelton rushes towards me with surprising speed, she has rounded the fire and stands in front of me before I have even managed to shift my feet. I look into her glittering black eyes and realize they are in fact a deep brown. Her pupils are much larger than a humans and I can only assume Miss Q can see better in the dark than me.

She takes my face in her small clawed hands and I can feel the sharp claws press at my skin as she inspects me, running her little paws over the bones of my face. “You have not been treated well. I can feel numerous badly healed fractures and breaks.” She grasps my hand and inspects it, muttering findings as she goes, “Calloused hands, healed knuckle breaks. A Fighter. Could it be you?”

I gape at the quelton. How could she possibly know these things?

Her eyes lock onto mine, and I feel as if she has gained access to my mind, I can feel her rummaging around inside my memories, and I try to pull away, but my body refuses to obey my commands to move.

Moment’s flash before my eyes, fights in the arena, beatings, illness, the pain of my branding, my mother, my necklace, and Lexa. Suddenly the memories change, memories that aren’t my own, I see a small fluffy creature, I can only assume is a young quelton, playing amongst siblings.

The image flashes to a guard forcing the littlest quelton into a bag, I see a tall shadowy creature force a collar around the small queltons throat and lash it to a pole before pushing a red hot branding iron into its shoulder. The quelton fights back and a guard prods it with a metal rod, the little quelton twitches violently and the memory ends.

Miss Q blinks and the connection is lost.

Chapter Twenty-four

Gently she strokes my face as I come to my senses, tears run down my cheeks as I try to make sense of what just happened. The emotions I felt that were not mine but rage through me as if they were.

Miss Q speaks softly, “Not all of us are evil. Some of us are just as trapped in this world as you are.”

I reluctantly inch my eyes back up to the queltons, flecks of yellow are fading from them. Miss Q removes one had from my face and lifts a section of fur on her shoulder, revealing a deep, poorly healed brand with the numbers ‘1217.’

I swallow. “You too?”

The quelton nods and spreads her paws wide, indicating at the wagons and people surrounding her. “My cage may be made of gold, but it is still a cage.”

Lexa stands beside us with her sword drawn, watching the interaction with concern. I offer her a weak smile and wipe my face. “I am unharmed.”

Lexa moves closer and looks intently at me, our eyes meet for a long moment. “I am unharmed,” I repeat. Lexa nods and returns her attention to the quelton.

Miss Q steps back and wipes her paws across her eyes. She glances at Lexa and me. “We have waited a long time for you.”

My eyebrows furrow at her words. Everyone around me tenses and my companions shift so they can quickly reach their weapons. The move is not missed by the quelton.

“Who is we?” Lexa asks in a low voice. She still hasn’t re-sheathed her sword.

The quelton settles herself down on a flat rock completely unconcerned by the potential threat my armed companions make and motions at the women who are cutting up the goat to begin cooking the meat. They place slabs of it on large hot stones and a satisfying sizzle bursts from the meat.

Miss Q flexes her sharp-clawed paws and runs them across the sleek black fur of her arms. “We are a group of creatures, created and natural

alike, who do not agree with Darkmor's plans. He has held us captive for centuries, your people have only had to endure a few decades of torment.”

Lexa eyes the quelton and sheaths her sword but doesn't remove her hand from the hilt.

I shake my head slowly and look up at the quelton. “Created?”

Miss Q takes in a deep sigh. “Not all the species in Shadowsoul occurred naturally. A few centuries ago, a dark sorcerer fled the lands above after being defeated by the Phoenix. He came here and used his dark, twisted magic to convert the simple creatures here, some he created from some kind of clay, others through a series of spells and enchantments on weaker creatures.”

Nathanial leans in and scoffs. “You are saying some guy, hundreds of years ago, created the monsters that follow Darkmor today with magic?”

The quelton looks at him with a deadly serious expression. “Yes.”

Lexa slowly sits next to me and rests her hand on my knee. “How can you be sure? As you said, this occurred hundreds of years ago.”

Miss Q accepts a cup of tea from one of her personal slaves and turns to Lexa. “This is little known, and I would appreciate you keeping it between yourselves.”

The group nods and Miss Q takes a sip from her drink as the women hand out slabs of cooked meat nestled on balooga bark. I accept the food and return my attention to the quelton.

Miss Q sets her meat aside and leans forward. “Queltons inherit the memories of their ancestors, and so, if my ancestors witnessed, experienced or encountered something, I have that knowledge too.”

“Why would you tell us this?” Lexa asks.

The quelton takes a bite out of her hunk of meat and chews thoughtfully. “Don't take this the wrong way,” she says through a mouthful of meat. “But we want the humans gone. We want our world to go back to what it was before the sorcerer arrived, created his monsters, and enslaved the creatures who lived here. Although to be fair, we can't be 100% sure he was human.”

Lexa sits back and relaxes ever so slightly. “So, we want the same thing. Is it an alliance you seek, or information? I am reluctant to say, but in the interest of honesty, we are poorly equipped to offer either.”

Miss Q smiles, revealing rows of serrated teeth. “I believe you are already doing what we want.” She leans forward and draws a swirling

symbol in the dust.



“This symbol means freedom in the old language, only those who wish to help you know the meaning.” She rubs the symbol away with her foot as she sits up. “Eat up before your meal goes cold.”

Lexa nods and begins to eat her meat. The rest of our group takes Lexa's queue and starts eating. I poke at the cooked goat, hunger has fled me. But meals like this are few so, I take out my dagger and cut a slice of meat.

Arnita re-enters the clearing shouldering a small little sack of what I assume is her personal belongings. She snatches a lump of meat from the cooking stone and takes a defiant bite from it while scowling at everyone around her.

The tension builds and everyone eats in silence. I complete my meal and carefully wipe my knife clean on a plant nearby before sheathing it. I settle back down beside Lexa when a loud whistle from overhead pierces the quiet, and a small explosion of blue and purple light strikes the ground about 200 meters from where we are sitting. The force of it throws me back into Lexa, and together we land in a pile on the dirt. Bits of flaming balooga tree land scattered across the road and throughout our little camp.

I detangle myself from Lexa and pull my dagger from my belt. “What was that?”

Miss Q looks distinctly ruffled, her sleek fur standing up in patches. “Jamie and Jarmile to me.”

The blonde woman collects her daughter and the two rush over to Miss Q who hovers around them protectively.

Tash crawls up beside us, her eyes wide with fear. “They did it, they got them working.”

Lexa quickly climbs to her feet and looks up at the sky. “Are you sure?”

Tash helps Lucas to his feet and looks at Lexa. “Nothing else makes that sound.”

The whistling returns and I glimpse something silver as it streaks past above us. Another explosion goes off to our left, a little further away than the last one. The blast kicks up a cloud of dirt and dust sending it pelting in our direction. The soil stings my skin and burns my eyes.

The small girl flees in terror, running blindly into the darkness, the whistle returns, and the silver streak darts past once more. Miss Q dashes towards her, a dizzying blur of black and brown. She scoops up the girl and darts back to the group just as an explosion hits the ground where they had been moments before. A balooga tree is blown to smithereens and shards of it fly in every direction, flaming sections land throughout the clearing and smoke billows into the sky.

“What is it?” Miss Q roars at us.

“Something they were building when I was still a slave.” Tash whimpers. “Darkmor has found a way to blend human technology with magic.”

Miss Q’s eyes widen to such an extent that for the first time I can see the whites of her eyes.

“What is it doing here?” I ask as I stare nervously up at the sky.

Nathanial turns to Miss Q and points a massive finger at her. “You betrayed us!”

Miss Q places her hands on her hips and snarls once again revealing alarmingly sharp teeth, “I did no such thing!”

“This is not the time,” Lexa snaps. “Help me put out this fire, there is no sense in aiding them to locate us.”

Everyone, except Arnita who sits on the ground with her arms crossed, throws dirt onto the fire, extinguishing the coals. The whistle returns and I duck as another explosion, this time on the road, sends shards of rocks into the air. The explosion leaves a crater big enough for me to lay in.

The tangera shuffle nervously and suddenly break into a trot tugging their wagons down the road as they flee from the whistling monster and its explosive weapons.

“Bruce!” The little girl calls out as her mother clutches her to her chest. One of the giant beasts pauses to look for the young girl when

another explosion digs a massive hole in the road. This proves too much for the tanger who canters off into the darkness.

I glance at the group. "Either they have terrible aim, or they are deliberately missing us."

Nathanial turns to me. "Why would they deliberately miss us?"

Miss Q points at me. "Because they know who she is and they want her alive, we mustn't let them get hold of her, her blood is the key."

My mouth falls open, the goblins had said something similar. "You know who I am?"

Miss Q nods. "Your hair threw me off, but you will need a better cover for that scar above your eyebrow."

"That doesn't matter now," Melissa cuts in. "How did they find us and how many more are coming?"

"Can that machine transport guards as well as explosives?" Nathanial asks.

The ominous whistle returns, and we all crouch together. The ground vibrates as another explosion goes off spraying us with dirt and balooga bark.

I wipe the dirt from my face and turn to the huddled group. "I vote we don't wait to find out."

"What do you suggest?" Lucas asks as he attempts to wipe his glasses free of dirt but only manages to smudge it around.

I grip the hilt of my sword and I point at the sky. "That thing takes time to turn around, or more of those bombs would have been dropped already. If we move fast and in the dark, we could lose it."

Arnita looks between us. "Why don't we just wait here and see what happens?"

Miss Q scoffs, "Oh, you think that will end well for us, do you?"

The mother hugs her daughter and turns to the group. "I can't let them take Jamie, she is much too young, this is the best work I have ever had. I won't let her go into the slavery that I knew."

Miss Q reaches out a paw and sets it carefully on the mother's arm. "Jarmile, I will not let them take Jamie, I promise."

The woman looks at the quelton, her tear streaks cutting through the dirt that has settled on her skin. "Thank you."

Lexa grips her sword. "After the next explosion, we run as a group. Stay together, separately they will pick us off."

We all crouch, ready to run. Waiting in an eerie silence for the deathly whistle, sweat flows unchecked down my neck, and I curse the heat of the nearby lava pools. A high-pitched whistle zips towards us, and I catch a glimpse of silver in the sky before an explosion of blue and purple erupts a few hundred feet from us.

“Now!” Lexa roars.

We jump to our feet and race into the trees, I push the mother and child in front of me. I look back, the clearing is empty. I am the last one.

I sprint towards the line of trees, following the footsteps of my companions. My body is jerked to the side as I am tackled from behind. I hit the ground hard, sliding into a trunk that knocks the wind from my chest. A weight settles on my back, and I feel a blade press against my neck.

“You’re not going anywhere,” huffs Arnita’s voice. “You and the 10,000 gold coins are my ticket to freedom.”

I force my elbow into her ribs and buck my body, throwing Arnita off my back. I scrabble in the dirt to regain my footing and turn to face the woman, her hair is loose, and the whites of her eyes show too clearly in the darkness.

The woman charges me, I dodge the dagger and deliver a few well-placed punches that have her sprawling on the ground. I march over to her and stomp on the hand holding the knife, Arnita lets out a cry and releases the weapon.

I kick it into a smoldering crater and draw my sword holding it at Arnita’s throat. The woman meets my eyes with pure hatred.

I raise my eyebrow. “I wouldn’t move. Unlike you, I know how to use this.”

“Claire!” comes Lexa’s cry in the distance.

“I’m here,” I yell back, not moving my eyes from Jamie.

The whistle returns and an explosion of blue and purple basically drops beside us. Trees explode, and I am thrown back, debris lands on top of me, and for the second time today I am winded. Gasping for air, I crawl to my feet, my ears ringing louder than anything else.

Darkness is all I see, I wave my hand in front of my face. Nothing. I can’t see anything. I wipe at my watery eyes, but it does nothing to clear away the darkness. I crawl along the ground and by luck stumble across my sword, fumbling I re-sheath it and sit in the dirt. The ringing in my

ears begins to subside, but still, my vision has not returned. I debate the wisdom of continuing my blind fumbling. What if I crawl into a crater? Or a fire? What if Arnita has regained her weapon?

I take a deep breath. I pull out my dagger and grip it tightly. Waving a sword around when I cannot see isn't a great idea, I sit and try to listen with deaf ears.

The ground vibrates, and a dull crash is accompanied by bits of dirt and debris. I do my best to shield my face, but more cuts accompany the new ones I had gathered since lunch. I rub my ears, and one of them pops and is accompanied by an awful sucking sound but hearing in my right ear returns.

I shake my head as a sound competes with the ringing. "Claire!"

I swallow and grip my dagger. My body hurts from the explosion, and I fight the urge to vomit.

"Claire!" The sound comes through stronger this time.

"Lexa," I call out, my throat burning as if I had swallowed hot ashes.

A shadow moves in front of me. "Claire, are you okay?"

I swallow, relief flooding through me, it is Lexa. "I can't see," I force out, my voice like gravel.

Lexa gently places her hand on my arm. "Come on, let's go."

I stumble to my feet. "Arnita betrayed us. She told them somehow, she knew about the bounty and attacked me."

Lexa pauses for a moment. "Arnita is dead. Miss Q is retrieving her belongings, she has run ahead and claims she has found somewhere safe for us to wait this out."

I nod and stumble forward a few paces. My vision has returned to dark shadows and walking inside this cavern when I have all my facilities' is distressing enough.

"Here." Lexa reaches out and slips her arm around my waist, and I put mine around her shoulders, together we stumble into the darkness.

Another whistle. Lexa jerks us forward. This blast does little more than blow dirt at me, it must have been further away than the last one. As we travel, my vision begins to gain blurry colors and we make better time, the heat attacks us and sweat pours off me. I shake my head to try and dislodge the headache that has settled there, but all the movement does is make me dizzy.

Miss Q suddenly stands before us in a fuzzy outline about the height of my hip. “We must hurry, the guards are approaching the place where we met. I have covered our tracks, but if they bring any cerebi, they will find us.”

I feel a shudder go through Lexa that matches my own. That is an encounter everyone would rather avoid.

“Is your vision improving?” Miss Q asks.

I nod. “I can see shapes and some colors now.”

“Hmm,” says Miss Q. “I think it will return.”

A vibration runs through my feet accompanied by the boom of another explosion. Lexa tightens her grip on my waist, and I squeeze her shoulder in return.

“How much further is it?” Lexa asks.

The blurry outline of Miss Q pauses. “With how long you humans take to get places, another fifteen minutes at least. The others are already there, keep heading towards the lava fields you will get there soon.”

“Thank you,” Lexa replies.

The shadowy outline of Miss Q disappears. A small smile quirks on my face. “Gee she is fast.”

Lexa lets out a small grunt beside me as she half lifts me onto a rock. “All queltons are. Thankfully, she seems to be on our side.”

I control my labored breathing and ask. “What do you think about Miss Q’s claims of other non-human creatures being on our side?”

“It is an interesting concept I had not considered. It could be extremely beneficial to our cause, but the risk associated with it is great.”

I wipe my eyes for the millionth time. “The risk associated with everything we’re doing is great.”

A small laugh comes from Lexa. “You make a fair point.”

“How do you know where to go?”

“Before I went to retrieve you, Miss Q was directing us to a place between two small peaks. That is where we are headed,” Lexa replies.

I nod and trudge across the uneven landscape, my vision has almost returned to normal, and reluctantly I release my hold on Lexa so I can use my hands to help combat the latest rock staircase.

I scramble over an unusually large rock and my eyes land on two fuzzy feet, I glance up to find Miss Q looking down at me.

She smiles. "Isn't this an interesting turnaround? I don't think I have ever had the opportunity to look down at a fully grown human before."

I roll onto my back and let out a long slow breath, sweat practically bathing me. "Well, now you can cross it off your bucket list," I puff through labored breaths.

Lexa gracefully pulls herself up the rock and straightens her clothing. "Is it much further? I am not a fan of this climb."

Miss Q waves her paw. "It is just around the bend." With that, she zips off. I manage to track her black blur in the few seconds it takes for her to round the bend in the distance.

"It's so much hotter up here," I groan as I climb to my feet.

"Heat rises," Lexa replies.

I plod after her. "Oh yay. So, it is going to stay like this?"

Lexa slows down to walk beside me as the path widens out. "Unfortunately, yes."

I reach out and touch Lexa's arm. "Lexa, thanks for coming back for me."

Lexa turns her green eyes on me. "Of course. I would not have left you there."

I nod, and we travel towards the bend, the only sounds are the scuffing of feet, ragged breathing, and the occasional clunk of a rock as it's mercilessly kicked out of the way. We round the bend to find a small oasis of trees and greenery. Lush ferns fan their leaves at the dim light of the cavern, and vibrant green moss clings to the rocks, creating a soft carpet beneath my feet.

Our group is clustered around a small waterfall, which is fed by a large pool of water with no discernible source. Small animals dart from tree to tree. A little red feathery creature stops to eat a seed by my feet and sings its happiness into the cavern, other voices from around the tiny oasis join its song.

I look up at Lexa with a smile. "Okay, maybe the climb was worth it."

Lexa crouches and runs her hands over the moss. "This place is extraordinary."

Miss Q approaches us. "This is the birthing place of my kind, we believe it is important that our kits are brought into a world surrounded by nature." She pauses for a moment, her eyes glassy from memories.

“Although, it has not been used for many years. There are not many free queltons left to use it.”

Lexa rises to her feet. “Let us see what we can do to change that.”

Miss Q flashes us a grin. “You have decided I can be trusted.”

Lexa glances at me before addressing the quelton, “Trust is not given, it is built. However, I am prepared to build it with you.”

The small light brown eyebrows on Miss Q’s face rise. “Well spoken. Can I assume you are the leader of your people?”

Lexa’s face casts a shadow of sadness. “Of what remains of them. Almost too much has been sacrificed for this quest already.”

Miss Q nods, her face downcast. “Let’s see what we can do to make their sacrifice mean something.”

Together the two of them head off into the ferns and settle on the soft moss a fair distance away.

Deciding theirs was a conversation for leaders I re-join the rest of my group. Lucas is topless and scrubbing his shirt in the small river that flows from the waterfall, his pale white skin almost glowing amongst the lush green surroundings.

Nathanial is building up a pile of dried wood, and I cringe at the thought of the extra heat a fire would provide. Tash and Jarmile walk back down the hill carrying some kind of silver and yellow fish in their hands. While Melissa plays some game of chasey with little Jamie, the two are rolling around in the moss laughing like they don’t have a care in the world. Who knew Melissa would be this comfortable around young children?

I head right for the waterfall and take a deep drink. The water helps to soothe my sore throat, and my pounding headache ebbs a little. First goblins then magical technology today has been entirely too long.

Melissa runs past me and splashes Jamie with some water from the stream. The two enter a water fight that has me backing up. Finally, the fight ends when the young girl launches herself at Melissa and the two tumble onto the moss exhausted. Melissa eyes me as the little girl determinedly clings about her waist. “You’re filthy. Go wash up before this food is ready.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, mum.”

Melissa sends me a smile and a wink. “Follow the river, it winds into the ferns, you will find more cover there.” She indicates to the fish and the

unlit fire. "This is probably about an hour away."

I nod and turn around when Tash calls out. "Don't get your hair wet!"

Oh yeah, I had forgotten about that. I lift my hand to my hairline, and my fingertips return smudged in black. I sigh. I will probably sweat out the charcoal before the day is over anyway.

I walk further down the small stream and follow it into the trees. After securing a private place, I strip down to my bindings and give my clothing a scrub before laying them across ferns to dry. Small clouds rise from my attire as the heat of the nearby lava fields seeps into them.

I eye the slowly flowing water and try to gauge how deep it is. My inability to swim ever present in my mind. It doesn't seem to be any more than waist deep, and the water appears to be content with its lazy pace. I climb into the cold water. A sigh escapes me as my body temperature lowers, I pull off my bindings, scrub them and lay them out on a nearby rock. Using a handful of sand, I undertake the extensive task of removing all the lingering dirt and grime from my body, I even scrub the mud from my face. It's not like it was working anyway, Arnita figured me out pretty quickly. I lift my hand to the small cut on my neck where her dagger had bit into my skin. I shake my head, and I relax against the bank as the unhurried current swirls around my waist.

Light footsteps wake me from my doze and Lexa walks into the clearing, she starts when she spots me laying naked and she quickly lifts her eyes to study the ferns around us. My stomach twists and my heart hammers in my chest as Lexa's cheeks take on an ever so slight tinge of red.

Lexa clears her throat. "Claire, I did not realize you were here, or I would have announced myself."

Lexa politely turns her back to me and I push off from the rock and climb out of the water. I slip on my almost dry clothes and run my hands through my braids.

"I am clothed now."

Lexa slowly turns around, as if she is hesitant to catch me naked once more. "I apologize, Melissa sent me here to bathe. However, providing me with the information that you were here and currently in use of this area appears to have slipped her mind."

The corner of my mouth quirks. "You know how Melissa is, I swear her middle name is trouble."

Lexa nods. “Nevertheless, I apologize for intruding. You seemed...” Lexa's cheeks redden further. “Rather relaxed.”

“No need to be sorry, I was nearly asleep. You probably saved me from drowning.” I smile and wave my hand at the shallow stream. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

Lexa nods and begins removing her weapons and laying them by the water in easy reach of the rock, I had been resting on.

With a burst of courage, I didn’t know I had, I ask Lexa, “Do you want me to come back later to make sure you haven’t drowned?”

My heart hammers in my chest, did I just ask that?

Lexa freezes and visibly swallows, with great effort she finally replies. “That will not be necessary.”

Something inside me deflates as Lexa turns her back to me and for some reason, I am reminded of Arnita. I turn to leave the clearing.

Lexa's voice follows my footsteps. “Perhaps another time.”

My heart thunders in my chest as I flee the clearing following my courage.

Large blue eyes sneak glances at the roasted fish in my lap. I peek over and find hers picked clean. Jamie quickly looks away and stares at her feet her long blonde hair falling over her face.

I pass what is left of my fish to the small child beside me. The young girl looks at me, her eyes impossibly wide. “Thank you.”

I smile at her. “You can thank me by growing into a big strong woman.”

The little girl smiles revealing a missing front tooth. “I already grew this much this year,” the little girl divulges as she holds her thumb and forefinger apart to visually demonstrate her growth.

I ruffle her hair. “You will be bigger than me in no time.”

Jarmile smiles at me and mouths, “Thank you.” As she pulls her daughter in for a tight hug.

Lexa enters the clearing, her wet hair hangs free as she determinately avoids my gaze.

Miss Q rushes towards us in a blur of black. When she stops, I feel a little dizzy, and my stomach is unsettled from following her rapid movements.

The quelton holds up a knapsack. "This is..." a pause. "Was, Arnita's. Inside the bag I found these." A furry paw dives inside the backpack and returns holding three small white crystals, which flash slowly in her palm.

Lexa frowns. "They look like the crystals we use for light."

The quelton shakes her head slowly. "I forget how little you know. Of course, it is not your fault, the knowledge was stolen from you."

Nathanial kicks out his feet. "Well don't grumble about what we don't know. Just tell us already."

Miss Q flashes him a look that reminds me of an adult reprimanding a child who has spoken out of place. Nathanial retreats a little but holds his ground.

The quelton flexes her empty paw, and I swear I hear a deep rumble from her throat. She takes a moment to compose herself, and she begins her explanation, "These crystals when correctly used, can transmit messages across long distances to other receptive gems."

I inch forward on my rock and look up at Miss Q. "How does it work?"

Miss Q smiles at me and glances at Nathanial. "This is how a young Kit should ask questions."

Nathanial grunts. "You behave as if you are decades older than us."

Miss Q narrows her eyes. "I have seen ninety-three summers."

Nathanial sneers, and Lexa steps in, her voice oozing with deep authority, "Nathanial go see to the fishing lines."

Nathanial opens his mouth and shuts it. "Yes, Alexandra." He rises to his feet.

Lexa's beautiful face hardens, as she once more becomes the leader. "I will inspect the lines myself when you are finished."

Nathanial nods, probably realizing his little rebellion in using Lexa's full name will cost him in the near future. I glance at Lexa. Sometimes it feels like there are two of her. The Lexa who is a leader and the Lexa I have grown to care for.

Nathanial stomps off, and the quelton watches him go. She returns her gaze to me with a kind smile. "Now, you asked how these work?" I nod. "When these crystals are arranged in a triangle they can be used to transmit and receive messages."

Miss Q arranges the gems as she speaks. The crystals flare into life, and miniature beams shoot out of them towards a point in the center.

I jerk back in surprise, and the quelton takes hold of my wrist. "It's okay, this is how the gems are supposed to behave when they are about to relay a message."

I nod and watch as the beams all come together to form a vibrant image of a cloaked figure with a black empty space where its face should be.

"We have sent a unit to collect 1408." The faceless figure rumbles. "If she is there, you will collect your due reward." The image suddenly disappears, and the crystals are dormant once more.

The quelton scoops them up and hands them to Lexa. "This is how Arnita betrayed us."

"Do the crystals send messages to all crystals or just specific ones?" Lucas asks timidly.

Miss Q rummages through the knapsack and pulls out a piece of paper. "Very few crystals are capable of transmitting messages to all gemstone clusters like the ones we have here." She indicates to the stones in Lexa's hands. "But crystals can connect to just about any other crystal cluster if you have the right connection code."

"Connection code?" Melissa questions.

Miss Q nods. "If you arrange the cluster in a triangle like we did before and say a certain phrase or number it will transmit a magical message to a particular cluster."

Lucas rubs his face. "How could Arnita know the code for the cluster that sent the guards after us?"

Miss Q holds out the paper. "Because she took this from my belongings."

Lexa takes the page, and I catch a glimpse of my face and my brand number in large print. Lexa reads aloud, "Report your siting's to 'Enforcer one.'"

Lexa's eyebrows knit together. "These messages can be transmitted as long as three of these crystals form a triangle, and the correct words are said?"

Miss Q nods.

"Are all crystals like this capable of sending messages? Even ones that have been imbued to give only light?"

Miss Q takes a moment to ponder the question. "No, they would have to be imbued with the magic for messages in order to send a message."

Lexa visibly relaxes.

I feel tension spread through my shoulders. “Can they be imbued with enough magic to do more than one thing?”

“Certainly,” Miss Q replies. “As long as the gifted individual possesses enough power.”

Lexa's eyes lock with mine. “The rebel compound was filled with these.”

“And some of them were set in triangles.” Lucas states. Lexa nods and folds her arms over her chest.

“When does the message end?” I ask Miss Q.

Miss Q raises an eyebrow. “When you move the crystals out of alignment.”

Something heavy drops into the pit of my stomach. “Once the crystals were running it would have been a continuous transmission to whatever cluster they had been linked to.” I turn to Lexa. “Were you aware of all the gifted in the compound?”

Lexa shakes her head. “Only those who had come forward, with their lives constantly at risk I would not have forced anyone to reveal such a secret.” Lexa rubs her head. “I have been a fool.”

“What are you two talking about?” Tash cuts in.

“Nathanial was right,” I state.

Lexa looks at the group. “We were betrayed.”

Chapter Twenty-five

“You’re saying that when the guards attacked us in the rebel headquarters that someone told them where we were, and that specifically Claire was there?” Melissa recaps.

Lexa perches on the rock next to me. “It is the only explanation for how they disabled our defense systems and attacked at one of the few times we were unprepared.”

Tash gapes at us. “It would only take a few well-placed crystals to send a continuous stream of everything important that took place within the rebel camp to Darkmor.”

Lucas shakes his head. “But how did he find us? Most rebels don’t ever leave the compound and they are brought there in secrecy. Very few could find their way back to it.”

I shake my head slowly. “The missing chimera.”

“What about it?” Melissa asks.

“They are used for tracking,” I say. “It could have led the army right to us.”

Silence settles over us and I look at Lexa, my heart thumps in my chest. I finger the necklace hidden in my pocket and say, “The cave in with the chimera, our meeting with the elders, our late evening in the mess hall.”

Lexa rubs her face. “Darkmor could very well know we have two of the gems already.”

The quelton nods. “Darkmor may be aware of the gems, but there is a good chance he doesn’t understand their significance.” She dumps Arnita’s bag on the ground, and a small tin rolls out. “From what my ancestors recall, he wasn’t a good student, and this drove his master into blind rages.”

Lexa gives the quelton a small smile. “That adds a small spark of hope, but we cannot run off it. We must assume he knows, to underestimate him could lead to our doom.”

I lean forward and pick up the tin that rolled out of Arnita’s old bag. Slowly I unscrew the lid, and a skin-colored cream fills about half of the small tin, I poke at it experimentally, and it sticks to my finger.

I rub the cream between my fingers, and it blends in with my skin covering a small scar on my finger.

“Keep it. It will cover the scar on your face well.” Miss Q announces. I jump not realizing my explorations had been closely watched, and I mumble a thank you as I slide the small tin into my pocket beside the healing paste that now lives there.

A whistle sounds in the distance and my stomach twists. I glance at the smothered fire and relief surges through me. It is good that the rest of my group cooked earlier.

“They have expanded their search.” Lexa comments.

Lucas chews his nail as he peeks into the dim cavern. “I think they really want Claire.”

Miss Q looks up at the cavern roof above us. “We should sleep amongst the ferns. I doubt they will find us here, but there is no sense in risking it.”

I climb to my feet and stretch, Lexa smiles at the group. “Get comfortable under the ferns by the bathing pool. I will join you presently, I have some fishing lines to inspect.”

I move with the rest of the group but stop when Miss Q calls out, “Claire, could you please help me carry these?”

I turn to eye the small pile of belongings Miss Q had retrieved from her wagons. With her super speed, she had probably gathered all of this before Lexa and I had even made it up here. I nod and begin stacking items inside a half-filled crate.

Miss Q set about stuffing items into the now ownerless backpack. I am about to lift the crate when I soft furry paw touches my arm.

“Claire. Do you know what Darkmor wants you for?” Miss Q asks.

I shake my head. “I have no idea. I assume it is because I escaped.” I pause and eye the quelton. “He took my mother just before I left, something about an investigation regarding her lineage. And the goblins who captured us said something about a ritual.”

Miss Q nodded. “I suspected as much.” A pause. “I am so sorry about your mother.”

My blank face seems to prompt the queltons into an explanation. “My theory is that you are part of the bloodline that defeated the sorcerer and used magic to banish him down here.”

“My family has no magic,” I mutter.

Miss Q raises an eyebrow. “And how do you suppose you have been activating that magical crystal of yours?”

I swallow. “We don’t know.”

The quelton hoists the bag onto her back. “Whether or not you are part of that particular bloodline, it is evident magic once existed in your family. It is possible it has been dormant until you.”

I silently lift the crate. My family magical? It doesn’t seem possible. Suddenly I am reminded of my mother’s claim that she is clairvoyant, maybe it wasn’t just intuition?

Miss Q leads me through the ferns and into a low overhanging cave. “When a powerful spell is cast,” she continues. “One that persists through the death of a caster, there is a blood bond. If Darkmor were to break this spell, his magic would spread like a plague throughout the world.”

I nod and place the crate down beside her backpack before we head back to the clearing to collect the rest of her stuff.

Miss Q twists her hands. “The only thing that can break a blood bond is the same blood that began it. This blood must come from a living being.”

I stop short. “You’re saying Darkmor wants me for my blood?” I shake my head and keep going. “But he has my mother, if living blood is all he wants, then why would he try so hard to get me? Unless-.”

The blood runs from my face, and I sit down hard. “No,” I murmur.

Miss Q crouches beside me and gently rubs her paw in circles on my back. “I am so sorry,” she repeats again.

“No,” I beg. It can’t be true, I look up at Miss Q and her solemn face. A terrible pain flows through my chest and tears sting my eyes. Gone. Just like that, no more conversations, I will never see her warm smile again. I conjure an image of my mother’s face in my mind and pain flares through my chest spilling out of me in my tears. I do my best to memorize her face, her blue eyes, brown hair and everything about her.

I put my face in my hands and tears flow unchecked. It cannot be possible, not my strong, willful mother. What did they do to her?

I force air into my lungs and attempt some composure, but anger replaces my grief as the reason for my loss burns through me. They killed my mother. All for a twisted beings grab for more power. I wipe my eyes furiously, I will kill anyone who put their hands on her. I swear it.

Miss Q presses a small thumbnail sized tube into my hand. "I know you are going through a lot right now, but I need you to listen to me."

I wipe my face, but the silent tears keep coming, my heart aches like someone has stepped on it and misery flows around me like water in the stream. I take a deep breath and look up at the quelton.

Her eyes are filled with tears too. "I am sorry I must ask this of you, especially now." She pauses. "In this tube is an extremely potent powder, it is quick and relatively painless. If you are ever captured by Darkmor and there is no hope for escape-."

"You want me to kill myself." I cut in with a dead voice.

Miss Q looks at the ground. "If there is no other option. Yes."

I look at the small tube in my hand, my death in a tiny pocket-sized capsule. How convenient.

"Ideally, I want you to survive, to vanquish Darkmor completely. After connecting with you, you're one of the few humans I like. But Darkmor's magic cannot be allowed to spread."

I hold up the tube. "If I take this, your hope for freedom will be lost too."

Miss Q hangs her head. "I know." She lets her statement hang in the air between us for a minute. "But right now, his power is limited within these cavern walls, just as his masters was. If he gets out..."

I stare at the moss at my feet. "He will end the world with his darkness," I finish.

"Claire?" calls Lexa's voice through the ferns.

I stuff the metal cylinder into my pocket and pin the quelton with a look. "Lexa will never hear from you about this powder."

The quelton bows her head. "Of course, you have my word."

"I'm over here," I call out into the dim cavern.

Lexa enters the clearing with a filled crate. "When I came back, I saw you two leaving and thought I would bring up the last of it." She catches sight of my tear-streaked face and stops dead. "Claire, are you alright?"

The tears that I had been barely keeping down resurface and I cover my face in my hands. Lexa is by my side in a moment, kneeling in the soft moss and holding me close as I weep. I turn and cling to her as if she were a lifeline. The warmth of her body offering a comfort I could have never hoped to achieve on my own.

My ear is pressed against her chest, and I feel her voice rumble as she addresses Miss Q, “What happened?”

A pause. “We have strong reason to believe Claire's mother has passed into the next world, and that Darkmor is unable to complete his blood ritual without the living blood of Claire's family.”

Lexa squeezes me closer, her arms a protective barrier from anything that may cause me further pain. “We will discuss this more later. For now, would you mind leaving us?”

“Of course,” comes Miss Q’s voice accompanied by the soft sounds of feet on moss fading into the distance.

I cry my pain into Lexa's shoulder while she holds me. I hurt so bad I feel as if I have suffered a wound that will never heal. She begins to hum, a soft, quiet tune with a beautiful voice. I quieten my cries as I focus on the sound, slowly her humming turns into a song.

I listen quietly as she sings a wonderful song about rainbows, bluebirds and dreams coming true.

Her song ends, and I pull away wiping my face. “That was beautiful.”

Lexa's ears turn a light shade of pink. “It is something my mother used to sing to me. It always gave me hope.”

“Thank you for sharing it,” I mumble.

Lexa climbs to her feet and offers me her hand. “Should we return to the others?”

I give her a weak smile and take her hand. “Is it an old song?”

“My mother always said so, she claimed it was one from the world before ours.”

I nod. I too had heard of the world that existed long before ours. Some people claim the monsters that almost destroyed our world are our ancestors. There was one man who shared my cell for a while who was particularly against the previous users of our planet. He would often rant about the world above, even claiming there were still dead zones from the war that wiped the previous inhabitants out. But after hearing that song, is it possible they weren’t all bad?

We traipse through the undergrowth, and I suspect Lexa is taking us the long way back so I can have time to compose myself.

We enter the clearing and find the others scattered under the largest ferns, sleeping in small groups. Unwilling to draw attention to myself I locate an unoccupied fern and curl up underneath it. I stare up at the

underside of leaves and watch small white insects travel backwards and forwards in single file.

Lexa settles down beside me, and I push all thoughts of my mother from my brain. I cannot allow this to consume me, there will be plenty of time for that after we complete our mission. My fingers find the little silver cylinder in my pocket. Or maybe there won't be.

Chapter Twenty-six

I awake to a painful squeezing, and I jolt up to find a long muscled creature has wound its way around my legs and is crushing me in its agonizing embrace. I let out a pained gasp and push at the scaly creature, its coils tighten, and it lifts its head to hiss at me, a forked tongue darting out to flick the air.

I glance over to Lexa to find her spot vacated. Panic bubbles up within me, and I pull my dagger out and brandish it at the creature. The head snaps at my hand with startling speed and I only just retreat in time. Those fangs don't look like they will provide a gentle bite.

"Help!" I cry out as I try to drag myself out of the creature's grip. All it does is coil itself tighter. People rush to me, the first to arrive is Nathaniel who I swear lets out a squeak and recoils.

Miss Q pops up next to him. "Oh, you got yourself a python."

Jamie pokes her head over, squeals and rushes back to her mother.

Lucas approaches the creature, and it hisses at the group, tightening around my legs. Pain explodes through my limbs, and a soft whimper escapes me as the beast worms its way up my body. "I don't care what it is," I say with gritted teeth. "Get it off me."

Miss Q darts in and grabs the beast's head in both her hands, slowly she uncoils it from my legs. The python doesn't look at all happy, and it hisses at the queen, Miss Q hisses back, and the python shrinks into itself and stops fighting her.

I sit up and rub feeling back into my legs as pins and needles rapidly spread through the limbs. The tender muscles scream at their mistreatment, and I am sure the bruising the python created will linger for a week at least. I crawl to my feet, if the animal comes back, I would rather be upright and awake.

Miss Q returns without the creature. "Snakes love it around here, the lava keeps them warm, you just have to know how to deal with them."

I raise my eyebrow. "You said it was a python."

Miss Q stops and rubs her head. "A python is a type of snake."

"And Nathaniel's petrified of them," Lucas snickers.

Nathaniel puffs up his enormous chest. "I am not, I simply did not wish to engage with the creature." He pauses searching for words and

adds, "I didn't want to make the situation worse."

The big smile plastered from ear to ear on Lucas brings out a small one of my own. Lucas walks right up to Nathaniel and points up at him. "You can say what you want, but I heard you squeak."

Nathaniel's eyes narrow. "I did not."

"It is excellent to hear they don't bother you, Nathaniel," Miss Q interrupts. Nathaniel gives Lucas an I told you so smile which fades when Miss Q resumes talking, "I placed it over by the woodpile. Seeming as you are un-phased by them, perhaps you wouldn't mind using the wood to build a fire for Lexa's return?"

Nathaniel's skin blanches, and he glances over at the wood pile. "Uhhh..."

Lucas lets out a small bark of laughter and slaps Nathaniel on the arm. "Come on big guy, I'll help you carry the wood."

A small smile creeps onto Miss Q's face and she is about to say something when a resounding boom echoes throughout the cavern as something punches through the roof of the cavern far in the distance and explodes in a flaming cloud of dust below. The ground shakes so violently I fall to my knees, many ferns around the clearing lose their hold on the ground and topple with me.

I gape as an uninterrupted beam of light pours through the small hole in the distance. My eyes water from the brightness and my knees rattle against the ground.

"What was that?" I hear myself ask no one in particular.

"I don't know," says Miss Q, her short spikes of hair standing upright all over her body making her appear at least half a size bigger than she actually is.

I stare at the thin beam of light and crawl to my feet. "Can you take me to a ledge so I can see better? Maybe we will be able to see what it was."

Miss Q grinds her teeth. "We can go, I am not sure how much there will be to see in the dim light of the cavern."

I point at the beam of light. "I am hoping that whatever created that will still be within its light."

Miss Q nods and takes off in, what must be for her, a very slow jog. I have to sprint to keep up.

She weaves us through countless ferns, and I can't help but notice how many of them have come down with the earthquake that thing caused.

Miss Q stops suddenly, and I almost cannonball into her. "The ledge is just on the other side of these plants." She pauses for a moment, hesitant.

I place my hand on her shoulder and give her a small smile. "I will go look, you can remain here if you wish, I will fill you in on what I see."

Miss Q visibly relaxes. "I will wait here in case others want to see."

I nod and weave my way around the last few bushes and ferns. I find myself standing on a sheer drop as the lush life around me suddenly ends in emptiness. I peek down over the edge, and my head swims from the height, I take a careful step back, with all the falling trees I don't need to risk the chance that this ledge has been weakened as well.

I look out into the cavern and follow the blinding golden beam of light to the ground. The glow highlights a giant crater, even from here it's massive, everything around it has been thrown out of the way or disintegrated. Small fires have sprung up around the hole and are slowly eating their way through the dry grasses and trees that had desperately clung to life in the dim cavern. Only the lava fields near the base of this mountain offer any comparison to the destruction of whatever fell from above.

The plants behind me shift, and I turn to see Lexa and Tash enter the space to stand beside me. Lexa has a small cut beside her eye and Tash looks like she took a tumble down a hill.

"Did you see what happened?" Lexa asks.

"We heard a crash, and then everything came down around us," Tash clarifies as she pulls a leaf from her hair.

I turn to face the beam of light. "Something covered in flames broke through the roof of the cavern and landed over there." I point in the direction of the crater. "We felt the explosion too, a big cloud of dust and fire rose high enough to be seen from our camp."

Lexa looks me over, and her eyes linger on the scale imprints still left on my pants. "Does Miss Q know what it is?"

"I don't know." I pause. "She seemed rather frightened, or at the very least, extremely distressed about what has happened."

A silver dart zips past us and zooms towards the crater and its new spotlight. All three of us crouch down and retreat into the foliage.

“Well, at least Darkmor will have something else to do for a while. I guess now would be a good time to leave while they are distracted by this new...” Tash waves her hand at the flaming hole in the ground. “Whatever that is.”

Lexa nods. “Excellent suggestion Tash, let us return to the others. We shall prepare the fish for travel then we will leave.”

I rub my hand across my neck. “It will be a shame to leave, I like this place. Well, minus the snakes.”

Tash and Lexa cast one another a look as I head back into the ferns to where we left Miss Q.

Miss Q stands beside a line of strung up fish that Lexa and Tash must have brought with them.

Together we head back, Lucas crouches beside a small cooking fire, feeding it. Nathaniel stands on the other side with the flames in between him and the woodpile, his massive hand resting on the hilt of his broadsword. A small smirk slips across my lips as I move to stuff my blanket into the backpack beside Lexa's neatly folded one.

I look around the group and Lucas and Nathaniel are stringing the fish across the fire while Lexa, Tash and Miss Q clean their hands with wet fern leaves. Jarmile and Jamie scuttle about collecting hot rocks to put in the fire for tea, someone must have shared our idea with them.

Jamie picks up a bright, colorful rock and holds it up with pride, scanning over the people in the clearing. “Melissa?” She calls out.

When no reply comes, I get up and inspect the place where Melissa had been sleeping, her blanket and water bottle are both still lying beneath a small fern.

“Melissa,” I call into the shrubs around us. Nothing but a slight breeze answers my call.

“Split up,” Lexa commands. “Call out if you find her.”

I slip into the plants and follow a trail of broken branches. I can hear the others calling out Melissa's name in the distance, and I resist the urge to call out. If she didn't answer before it is because she is gone, or because she can't.

I wind my way around a cluster of tall ferns and clamber over a fallen tree, in the distance, I spot a mass of curled black hair splayed out on the soft carpet of moss beneath a large fallen fern.

“She is here!” I bellow into the surrounding plants and run towards her, Miss Q arrives seconds after I kneel to the ground and together, we begin pushing away smaller leaves and branches, so I can see how badly Melissa is pinned.

I look under the fern and relief surges through me, luckily her legs seemed to have dipped into a wedge between two large rocks that are propping up the weight of the tree. It looks incredibly uncomfortable but none of the weight is on her legs. It will have to be lifted before we can pull her out, but the tree has not crushed her.

I let out a slow sigh of relief. I have seen awful things happen to people who get crush injuries, often they die slowly and painfully. The few who survived this type of injury often suffer limb removal in an attempt at stopping the spread of the bodies poison.

I inspect the blood and the egg-sized lump above her temple, the falling fern must have struck her. I move my hand from her head to find clear liquid coating it, my eyebrows furrow and I twist to look at the side of Melissa's head, clear liquid is oozing out of her ear. Apprehension fills my stomach, I don't know what this means but instinct tells me it's bad.

A grey spider with a black triangle on its abdomen scuttles up Melissa's arm and sinks its fangs into the exposed skin between her neck and shoulder.

“Hey!” I yell and reach for the creature.

Miss Q is faster and seizes the giant spider in her fist, its legs wriggle in the air as it tries to break free from her grasp. “I have never seen a spider like this before. Let alone in the birthing grounds.”

I inspect Melissa's reddening bite as the sounds of crashing announce the arrival of the rest of the group.

I turn to Miss Q. “You said yourself it has been many years since you have been here, perhaps they have moved in since then?”

Miss Q drops the spider to the ground and promptly crushes it with a large rock. “Can't have them running around. It is not meant to be here, and I won't have it.”

Nathanial thunders past and lifts the massive fern alone. His bulging muscles shining in the dim cavern light.

I loop my arms around Melissa and drag her free of the plant, Lexa is by my side inspecting Melissa's wounds in an instant. The ground vibrates

as Nathaniel drops the massive fern with a loud thud and stands off to the side, unsure what to do now his strength is not needed.

I look back at Melissa. “I don’t know what to do about the bite. It just happened.”

Lexa is quick to press her hand to the wound. “What was it?”

I shrug. “A big grey spider, with a black triangle on its back.”

Lexa's eyebrows furrow as she returns to her task. Lucas and Tash begin constructing a stretcher and within minutes they have a blanket lashed to the two poles and Melissa is gently lifted onto it.

“We need to clean the bite,” Lexa states in a calm voice. “Some spiders carry a bacteria that eats flesh.”

I shudder at the thought, and we hurry Melissa back to the river. “What about her head?” I ask eyeing the purpling lump and the slow drip of fluid from Melissa's ear.

Lexa's lips press into a hard line. “There is nothing we can do about that but wait and see.”

Tash is quick to put hot rocks into one of the small balooga seeds we still carry with us, the water inside begins to steam, and silently Lexa begins working on cleaning the wound.

By now Melissa is at least two shades paler than she used to be, her body is covered in a light sheen of sweat, and violent shakes have started to wrack her body.

I touch her hand, and the heat is almost overwhelming. I dig my own blanket out of our backpack and go soak it in the stream. The water is warm but still cooler than Melissa.

I hurry back and use the blanket to wipe Melissa down before folding it over her forehead, avoiding touching the angry swollen lump there. As I wipe down Melissa with the wet blanket, I notice another bite on her arm, it looks just like the one on her neck.

I point at it. “She has another bite.”

Lucas looks at it and almost whines, “I thought you said she was only bitten once.”

I open my mouth but Miss Q cuts in, “I was there, we only saw her get bitten once.”

“Perhaps it happened before you arrived?” Lexa suggests as she begins to clean the newly found bite.

I nod and sit back. Tash has begun the extensive task of locating and removing all of Melissa's knives. It is a good idea, that last thing we need is for her to puncture herself with one of them when she has the full body shakes.

She sits back, and I catch a glimpse of metal hidden in a sewn pocket on the inside of Melissa's sleeve. I pull it out just as Melissa launches into a fit. Foam builds up in her mouth.

"Roll her to the side," I screech. "Careful with her head." Swiftly we roll her onto her side and wait for the shaking to stop as the white foam rolls from her mouth.

When she finally lays still and unmoving, I wipe the foam from her face and consider our options. "I think we should lay her down on her back," I say slowly.

"Won't moving her make her head wound worse?" Tash asks stress and strain spread across her features.

I shake my head. "I don't know, I am worried that having her on her side will encourage more of that clear stuff to flow out of her ear."

We all look at our pale sweat covered friend, her life hanging in the balance of our actions. Why didn't we bring a fully trained medic?

Lexa nods decisively. "Roll her onto her back. Slowly."

We all carefully roll Melissa. Tash takes charge of her head and ensuring it is not lolling about.

I remove my tunic and fold it, laying it under Melissa's head. With that done I slip the tiny knife I retrieved from Melissa into a pocket I have on the outside of my chest binding, hiding it just beneath my shirt.

Jamie clutches her mother's hand. "Mummy will she be okay?"

Jarmile glances at us, pity in her features. "Melissa is a very strong woman." Is all Jarmile offers to her frightened child.

This seems to settle the young girl who goes off to sit in a nearby cluster of small yellow flowers.

Lucas paces back and forth while Nathaniel busies himself with cooking the fish. No one says anything, and Melissa doesn't show any sign of stirring.

Lexa ties a cold compress across the now clean bite, and we all sit back. We can do nothing now but wait.

Nathaniel passes out the cooked fish, and it feels dry and flavorless in my mouth. We sit in tense silence, afraid any noise would cover the sound

of Melissa stirring.

Lucas sits beside her holding her hand, his fish forgotten. “Why isn’t she waking?” he whines.

Miss Q sprinkles herbs into a paste she is making and glances up. “She took quite a hit to the head, and now her body is fighting off whatever the spider put into her. It is a heavy toll on the body.”

She doesn’t say it, but we all think it. This toll might be too high for Melissa.

Jamie inches up to Melissa and lays a bunch of flowers tied together with grass by her head with the smooth, colorful rock she had found earlier. She settles down beside Melissa and holds each of the things up for Melissa as if she might at any moment open her eyes to see them. “I picked some of the butter flowers you said could be eaten, you are right they do taste like milk. I picked some for you too,” The young girl says waving the flowers about before carefully putting them beside Melissa's pale face. “I found this pretty rock,” she continues. “And I thought you might like it because it’s pretty and tough like you.”

The little girl sits quietly for a moment and my heart aches as if my unshed tears are welling inside it. “Melissa, you have to wake up,” she pleads. “We were going to weave nets today, and eat butter flowers until our tummies hurt, I don’t want to do that with anybody but you.”

Jamie lets out a big snuffle, and her mother comes to collect her. “Jamie, that was very nice of you, but we should let Melissa rest.”

The group resumes its silence, and the young girl's heartfelt pleas sit within my stomach. I want Melissa to wake up too.

I glance at Lexa and finger the gem in my pocket. It woke Lexa before, so why not Melissa? Slowly, hesitantly I take it out of my pocket, Lexa's eyes lock with mine and dart back to Miss Q who is now applying the paste to Melissa's bite.

I loop it around my neck and wait. Lexa takes a deep breath and retrieves her necklace too, together we head over to Melissa and kneel on opposite sides.

Lexa looks up at me, her green eyes huge. “Do you think this will work?”

I swallow. “I think we have to try.”

I place my hand on Melissa's head, careful of the swollen lump and bruising around her temple. Lexa mirrors my actions. I take a deep breath

and reach out for Lexa's other hand.

Our fingertips meet, and blue-green light explodes around us making the fire look dim in comparison. Miss Q who had been kneeling beside Melissa applying the paste to her neck looks at us and the brightly colored bubble around us in wonder. A flow of power rushes through me, and I feel it pour into Melissa, lines of blue begin to erupt over my skin appearing faster than they ever have in the past.

I ignore the burning sensation of skin being torn apart and focus all my attention on Melissa waking, on the bites healing, on her head wound mending. She twitches, and for a moment I fear she will have another seizure, but the movement settles. Painful searing announces the arrival of a long magic wound across my stomach, I grunt as the pain rips through me but refuse to let go of Lexa or Melissa. By now I am coated in numerous wounds, my arms covered in more than I can count and my back and stomach scream in protest as I feel more open there. I look up to find Lexa is sporting only five visible magic cuts. Blue light pierces through the back of the hand I have on Melissa's head and her eyes blink open.

I release my hold on Lexa and slump over as pain wracks my body. I glance at Lexa who looks considerably better than I feel. Six emerald, green punctures shine brightly on her arms and neck and one has taken over the cut by her eye.

Melissa stirs below me, and I look down at her. The nasty swollen lump on her head has disappeared, and all that remains is a splattering of blue and purple bruising.

Melissa turns her head slowly to look at me, she licks her lips and croaks, "I got hit by a tree, and I still look better than you do."

I let out a small bark of laughter. "You wish." I smile and add, "It is good to see you are feeling better."

Melissa groans, "I'm not sure how I was before this, but it feels like I got trampled by a herd of Tangera."

Everyone rushes over, and Lucas fusses over Melissa's head and readjusts her makeshift pillow.

Miss Q places a paw on my shoulder, and I am led to a spot by the fire, she settles me down beside Lexa, I clutch at my arms as a shiver runs through me.

The quelton returns with a blanket, which she throws over the two of us and brings us a cup of hot tea. She twitches her snout as she looks at us.

“You shouldn’t have done that, your magic has greater consequences than you know.”

I rub my aching head. “She is our friend.”

“You knew about our magic?” Lexa cuts in.

“Of course, I did, I could feel it in you when I met the two of you, and after being inside Claire's mind, there is not much I do not know.”

I shift uncomfortably and glance at Lexa. The quelton gives me a small smile. “I will not share anything that is not absolutely necessary.” I nod and let out a slow breath.

Lexa sips her tea. “Do you know what the consequence of using our magic is?”

Miss Q lets out a long huff of air through her small snout. “Magic that powerful leaves a mark, a stain that cannot be removed.”

My eyebrows furrow. “What do you—”

A silver object darts by, too close for comfort. The loud whine of its mechanical engines drowning out my question.

Lexa staggers to her feet her, tanned skin made pale by the plethora of lines coating her body. “We need to go.”

Another large silver dart flashes past, its droning engine pairing with its buddy and creating an unbearable noise. Darkmor’s silver darts, I had completely forgotten about them. How long have we spent tending to Melissa’s injuries? My eyes lock with Lexa’s. It cannot be a coincidence that we used our powers and suddenly they have found us. But how? When we use our magic together, we are invisible.

I climb to my feet fighting off nausea that screams at me to stop. Tash, Jarmile and Jamie dart around the clearing stuffing all our belongings into bags, while Miss Q puts out the fire.

Nathanial finally having a use for his strength seizes one end of Melissa's makeshift stretcher, and Lucas is quick to grab the other. Together we hurry through the undergrowth using the largest ferns as cover from the flying machines that scour the area performing an inch by inch search of the birthing grounds. My aching magic wounds throb painfully, and sapphire light pours through the cuts on my arms. I grunt and wrap my blanket tighter around myself. I am basically a beacon in the shadowy cavern.

Lexa isn’t doing much better than me, but at least she has her tunic on, mine has been stuffed into one of our bags, seeing as we are running

for our lives, this isn't really the time to stop and dig through them to find it.

I dodge around the fern that had almost crushed Melissa and stumble over a rock hidden behind it. Regaining my footing, I glance back as silver darts converge on our position and my stomach tightens. Melissa is being jostled unceremoniously, and I am glad Tash took the time to remove her knives when she did.

My hands and face cast an eerie blue glow along the dark ferns that mixes with Lexa's emerald, green light. There is no way the machines cannot be seeing us.

"We should split up," I yell over the whistle droning throughout the clearing. "Lexa and I are too noticeable, and we can't move fast with Melissa like this."

Tash casts us a pained look. "Maybe there is shelter ahead."

Miss Q zips towards us and slows to keep pace with us lumbering humans. "I have created a fire off to the other side of the birthing grounds. Hopefully, that draws them away."

As if her words had a magical effect, the large flying darts rush towards the sight of smoke in the distance. I nod and force air into my lungs, my tired body screaming in protest with every jarring footstep.

We come upon a ledge and find the remains of a bridge. Our hope for escape fades as my eyes lock on to the cut rope. I crouch and pick up the cable. This has been cut recently with a very sharp blade, the fibers haven't even had a chance to fray yet.

My stomach twists, either we are being followed, — I cast a glance at the people behind me, —or someone here is preventing our escape. Lexa steps beside me and glances at the rope in my hand, her face pales at the sight of it and she too looks over the group standing behind us.

The ground trembles beneath my feet and the dirt around us begins to crack. I stumble to my feet and push Lexa roughly back into the ferns, and she tumbles onto firmer ground. The wave of cracks surrounds my shoes, and I take a hasty step forward, but the ground beneath my feet crumbles, and with it the world beneath me gives way.

Chapter Twenty-seven

My heart leaps into my throat as rocks fall around me, dimly I hear my name called as I tumble down the rock face. Stones dig into my sides, and I strike my head on something solid that brings forth a burst of silver spots. I try to turn my body, so I am falling feet first, but the rolling movement of the dirt beneath me spins and turns me, heedless of my best efforts.

Finally, the tumbling comes to an end, and I lay crumpled and gasping for air buried amongst a pile of dirt and stones, not daring to move. Every part of me burns.

One breath at a time I return air into my screaming lungs. I can't find the energy to move and everywhere dust clouds my vision like a thick impenetrable fog. I try to lift my head from the jagged piles of rocks that attempt to pillow it, but my eyelids droop, and darkness fills my vision.

I jerk up and lick my dry lips, the dust has settled, and everything has taken on a deathly silence. How long have I been asleep for? I try to pull myself up but pain flares through my legs, I look down to find I am buried to the waist in dirt and rocks.

I grit my teeth and wipe at the dried blood on my head as fire flares through my trapped legs. I force out a slow breath. I suppose I should be grateful for the pain, no pain would be a more terrifying indicator. With shaking disobedient hands, I slowly, painfully, begin pulling rocks and dirt away from me.

Exhaustion is a funny thing, the way it eats at your will power. I valiantly struggle to pull a head sized rock away from my left thigh, and with a grunt, it rolls free. Hundreds of smaller rocks fill its place. I groan and slump forward leaning across the rock I had designated as my pillow, the taste of dirt on my cracked lips.

My body shudders from the painful movement, but I am too tired to do anything about it. A small smirk crawls across my face, at least when I die here, I am already halfway buried.

I suck in breaths that are like knives in my chest as I lay slumped watching a white beetle strut across the rocks, gloating as it freely moves

its six tiny legs. I glare at the beetle, the damn thing doesn't know how good it has it.

I lay in the rocks for hours, perhaps even days, it's hard to tell when consciousness swims and fades before your eyes, and it's not like the darkness of the cavern does anything to help track the time. I swallow, attempting to soothe my parched throat, but my dry mouth offers no relief, cracked and dry lips scream with my throat, competing over who has it worse.

Rocks shift in the distance, and dreamily I move my straining eyes towards the sound, my vision swims with the movement, and my stomach violently complains. Maybe if I am lucky, it will be some animal coming to eat me? That has to be quicker than dying trapped in the rocks like this.

A man with vibrant red hair comes into focus, he is searching through the boulders, rolling things here and there. He stoops to pick up a dirty and mangled fern leaf, the red-headed man inspects the mottled foliage and shoves it into a basket he has on his back. Hope spikes within me, and I watch as he approaches. Surely, he must see me. The man wanders around, oblivious to the urgency of my situation. Something catches his attention, and he moves away, slowly heading out of sight.

Fear builds in my stomach. He hasn't seen me. I try to find the ability to call out, but speech has fled with the moisture of my mouth. Painfully, I draw the small dagger I had taken from Melissa out of my chest binding, blood coats the edge of the blade, and I grimace.

I grip the little metal knife and force my arm towards the nearest rock. The blade falls from my grip and clatters noisily against the stone, ringing throughout the area. The man stops, turns, and searches the stones.

I reach for the knife, my fingers skitter across the edge, and it spins just out of reach. I take a deep breath and launch at the dagger, agony flows through my back and arms but I manage to grasp the blade. Its sharp edges cutting into my palm, pressed there by the force of my grip. I focus all my will on lifting this small dagger, this time I drop it over a larger flat rock, and the metallic clatter rings loud and true.

This time the man locks his eyes on me and hurries over. I grope in the dust and take hold of my tiny metal savior.

The man with fuzzy red hair crouches down beside me, his bright blue eyes startling against the deep mane of red. He leans forward and a purple crystal swings out from his shirt dangling in the dusty air. The

purple gem gleams in the dim light of the cavern. My eyes lock onto it, and my hand painfully rises to the one I have around my neck. I pull it out of my shirt, and it glows brightly in my hand.

The man follows my movement, his eyes widen, and an audible swallow follows when he realizes what I am showing him.

I lick my cracked lips with my sandpaper tongue and look up at him, the importance of this next word needs to be conveyed in a single gasping breath, “Lexa.”

The man’s eyebrows shoot up, and darkness consumes me once more.

I awake to painful jostling, as someone attempts to pull my clothes from me. “We need to get her in water, if she won’t wake enough to drink any, it is our best option.”

A wet cloth is wiped over my exposed arms and legs and goose bumps erupt over my skin as the cool air settles on it. Someone grabs my necklace, and they lift it from my chest, agony flows through me and I muster a pitiful groan.

“No.” A strong male voice calls out. “Leave it, I am pretty sure that gem is the only reason she is not dead.”

The hand draws away and the crystal sits once again upon my skin. I sigh in relief. I flutter my eyes, and a soft squeal proceeds a wooden spoon filled with water pressing against my mouth. The water spills over my parched lips, dribbling down my face and neck. It’s glorious. Eagerly I open my mouth, desperate for more.

“Slowly my dear girl,” says a kindly older voice. “Too much too soon will make you ill.”

I drag my eyes away from the spoon and rest them on an older woman with greying hair, her brilliant red overalls dulling the rest of the colors in the room.

“Thank you.” I say as I struggle to stay focused on the woman in front of me. “Who are you?” I croak.

The woman returns with a third spoon full of water for me. “Carissa is the name my mother gave me.”

A man pops into my vision, his red hair standing around his head like a halo. “So, what were you doin’ playing in the rocks like you were?” He sings at me.

I furrow my brows as darkness tinges the edges of my vision. "Landslide," I utter before I fall into the blackness once more.

I roll over with a groan, and the world spins before me, I fight back a dry retch and pull myself from the soft sheets. I lean over the bed, resting my elbows on my knees as I rub my face. I take in long slow breaths and the nausea settles into a disgruntled simmer in my belly.

The crystal around my neck swings forward, and it's sapphire light beams into the dim room. I clutch it in my hand to dim its light, but surely more people than I care to mention, are aware of the strange necklace by now.

I am clad in some kind of long white shirt that falls to my knees, dwarfing my already small body. I take a slow breath and glance down at my legs, I am covered in bruises from my feet to my hips. Gingerly, I touch the tender skin and moderate pain that comes with bruising runs from the pressure of my fingers.

How can it be, that after falling down that cliff and being pinned between rocks the only damage I have is bruising? I run my hands along my legs, no broken bones, no missing limbs, not so much as a cut. Well, except for the magic wounds I have spread across my body. I wriggle my toes and the small blue cuts coating them flare with life.

I inspect the nearest wound, sapphire light pools from the inch long cut on my elbow as it rudely pushes its way through my skin to meet the world. I sigh, it is almost as if these magic wounds are a permanent addition to my body.

I spot a glass of water on the nearby table and eagerly grasp it. My first instinct is to guzzle, but the woman's words remind me to drink slowly. The water helps to ease the pounding in my head and far too soon the glass is empty.

I set the cup down and find my clothes neatly folded on the floor beside my bed. I struggle into them. By the time I have them on, I am panting and covered in sweat. Shaking, I perch back on the edge of the bed.

"No, you can't go in there! She is resting!" Calls a shrill voice.

The door across from me is flung open, as whoever that call was for disobeys. Lexa stands in the doorway, covered in dirt and dust. Her emerald eyes land on me and in three swift steps she crosses the room and

pulls me into her arms. "Claire. I feared the worst." She whispers as she pulls me closer it is a strange combination of agony and relief.

After a moment my body relaxes into her embrace, and I hold her back, shaking from exhaustion but unwilling to let go of the woman in my arms.

I lick my lips. "It will take more than a falling wall of rocks to take me out."

Lexa chuckles in my arms. "Yes, you are far too stubborn to be defeated by a few tons of stone."

I smile. "Exactly."

Carissa sweeps into the room looking harassed as my small dirty group of companions peep in through the doorway.

"Claire," squeals Tash, not bothering to let me and Lexa separate before she adds herself to the hug. "We have been looking for you for three days."

Lucas comes in and joins in on the group hug. "We were starting to think you had been squished." Tash whacks him.

I peek over their shoulders to find Melissa standing pale and unsteady on her feet beside Nathaniel, they both smile at me. I squeeze the group back and feel another set of arms join the embrace. I turn, expecting to find that Melissa has caved and joined the hug, only to get a face full of wiry red hair.

I raise my eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

The man lets out a contented sigh. "I love group hugs."

I slowly detangle myself from the group. "Usually, I like to learn the names of people before I decide whether or not to hug them."

The man steps back and holds out his arm. "I'm Edward, collector of strange things, reader of minds and most recently, the un-digger of landslide graves."

A small smile quirks at the corners of my mouth, and I grasp the man's hand. "Thank you, Edward."

"The pleasure is all mine, I never expected to meet a Xineoph in my lifetime." He glances at Lexa, his eyes twinkling. "Let alone two."

My eyebrows do their best to crawl up into my hairline. "What is a Xineoph?"

The man with red hair laughs loudly before he catches my face, a quick glance at Lexa, and his happy face transforms into a grimace. "By

the Phoenix, you really don't know?"

I shake my head, and Edward runs his hands through his red mane. "Oh dear, oh dear," he mumbles shaking his head and glancing between Lexa and me as if he expects us to laugh and yell out, 'this is all just a trick.'

Carissa is pale-faced and places her hand on Edwards' arm. "It is okay, I am sure they can be taught."

Edward shakes his head violently. "There isn't time."

"What is it that we are supposed to learn?" Lexa cuts in.

Edward stammers in-coherent words as he clutches his head, pulling his hair and groaning. Suddenly I am struck with familiarity, I grab hold of Lexa's hand and squeeze. "This is the man from our dream."

As the words leave my mouth, Edward falls to the ground and has a fit, his purple necklace shining so brightly that my eyes struggle to look at him.

Edward thrashes uncontrollably, and Carissa hurries to move furniture away from the seizing man. Coming to my senses, I help her to push a nearby table against the wall.

Edward screams, "Only the warrior escaped and found, can save us from what lies beneath the ground. Flaming boulders plummet from the sky, without her help we are doomed to die."

I glance at Carissa, it is clear she is just as lost as I am. Edward stops his full body seizing and rolls to his side whimpering.

I kneel beside him and lay my hand on his arm. My necklace shines brightly, and his sputters out light in response before it dims, as exhausted as its wearer.

Carissa looks at us with an apologetic smile. "This happens to Edward sometimes, it will be a while before he is able to converse. If you go outside dinner is being served, each of you go and have a bowl." She looks me in the eye and clarifies, "You are to have at least a bowl. Remember to go slow."

I nod and we crowd out the door. As we pass Nathaniel pushes inside, scoops up the whimpering man and gently lays him on the bed I had recently vacated, before he too squeezes out the door to stand with us.

I look at Nathaniel with great surprise. He has the strangest ways of showing kindness.

My attention turns to our location, and I look around to discover high walls of rock on either side of us, it is almost as if we are inside one of the chasms Melissa and I had found just before the goblin attack. A small rock tumbles down the rock wall, and I shudder at the memory of being half buried. That was the first time I had ever been so close to death and completely helpless to try and stop it.

I take a gulp of air as my legs start to shake. I would choose horrific death in a battle over that slow helpless death any day.

I stumble and crumple to the ground, my legs refusing to take me any further. Lexa and Tash crouch beside me and Melissa plonks down too, her pale face covered with sweat. "I'm so glad you were first to sit down. But I'm stuffed too."

I give her a small smile. "Walking is harder than I remember it."

Melissa nods and gingerly touches the moss padding on her neck. "I'm with you on that, for a tiny little critter, it sure did pack a powerful bite."

I glance at her. "It could have also been the tree that slammed into your head."

Melissa shrugs. "Aside from a few forgetful moments, I seem to have recovered from that. It's the constant sweating and exhaustion that keeps getting me."

Lucas nods thoughtfully and rises to his feet. "I will get you two some food." Nathaniel and Tash follow him and together the three of them drift towards the sizeable central campfire and the line building there.

Lexa sits between me and Melissa as if she is unsure who needs her the most. I look around. "Where are Miss Q and the others?"

Lexa sits back leaning on her hands. "They helped us look for you after the rockslide. It was Miss Q that found these people and led us here. She has left with Jarmile and Jamie to an undisclosed location, but she maintained the decision that she would remain in touch."

Melissa wipes her face on her shirt, revealing a glint of silver near her belt. "I'm gonna miss that little squirt."

Lexa pats Melissa on the shoulder before turning to stare into the fire.

I put my hand to my belt where someone had thoughtfully strapped the small knife, reluctantly I pull it out and offer it to Melissa. "Here is your knife. It is my small and tiny hero, but it belongs to you."

Melissa takes the knife and inspects it before handing it back with a smile. "It has Claire germs all over it, I don't want it. You better keep it."

I take the knife back with a small smile and turn the tiny blade in my fingers. "Thank you."

The others come back, and I am forced to retell the story of the landslide coupled with how Edward found me. Surprisingly I finish eating four bowls of the most delicious stew I had ever had, before I finally realized how much I was eating.

The group drifts into quiet conversations and I curl up by the small fire our group had built on the edge of the camp. A small light blanket is placed over me by Lexa who sits quietly, her hand resting on my shoulder.

Fitfully I doze, comforted only by my back pressed against Lexa's leg. It feels like it's far too soon when Lexa is shaking me awake. "Edward is asking for us."

Grumbling, I climb to my feet and trudge behind Lexa through the dim and quiet camp, everywhere people lay bundled in piles, sleeping in rings around fires.

Slowly we make our way towards the caravan where we had left Edward. I pause at the steps and look up at a young woman with light blonde hair, her green dress swinging softly with her movements.

"Edward has asked to see you," she said. "Please be mindful he is weak and upsetting conversations can trigger further seizures."

Lexa nods. "We would not deliberately try to harm Edward, thank you for your warnings, we shall be careful going forward."

The woman eyes us for a moment then steps aside, apparently happy with Lexa's response. We step into the dim caravan lit by a single candle beside Edward's bed, he is sitting beside it, his face pale and ghostly in the flickering light.

"Thank you for coming ladies," He announces with half the enthusiasm of our last encounter. "I am sorry you had to see me like I was earlier, such is the life of a Keeper, my body is not designed to handle the power of the necklace as yours are." He grimaces and rubs his face. "As you have seen, it can have adverse effects on one's health."

I grip the necklace around my neck. "The gems affect us too." Lexa nods as her hand rises to her hidden pocket.

Edward nods and lifts a small kettle off a table I hadn't noticed before, steadily he pours three cups of sweet-smelling tea. "I have seen

your magical wounds. The power you can draw from the gem is extraordinary, keeping you alive even with all that rock crushing you. Of course, your necklace just heals, the pain must have been unbearable.”

I push back the memory flash that surges forward and clench my jaw. Slowly I sink onto a cushion conveniently placed on the floor, Lexa follows my actions looking at me with a face filled with concern.

I swallow and turn to Edward. “What is a Keeper and how do you know that my necklace heals?”

“The first question is easy,” Edward says as he hands us a cup each. “A Keeper, which is me, has no direct lineage to the original owners of the gem and it is their job to protect it until its true Xineoph arrives, people like you. If none is found, the crystal is passed down the Keepers line.”

I nod and take a sip, the tea is delightfully fruity and has a faint smell of mint. Lexa leans forward. “So Xineoph are people who can use the gems powers?”

Edward pauses. “Not exactly. I have access to the gem’s powers, although it comes sporadically, often not of my choice and it affects me, as you have seen.”

I twitch. “The gem gives you fits?”

Edward sips his tea before continuing. “Yes. My body cannot handle the power of the gem, and I am only using a fraction of what you have accessed these last few days to stay alive.”

Silence settles over the room as everyone stares at their tea. Lexa casts a wary glance at me and asks, “How do you know if Claire's necklace heals?”

Edward pulls the blankets beside him into his lap and cuddles it. “Because there is no other way Claire could be alive right now. Some of the rocks that were on top of her legs were so heavy it took three strong men to lift.”

I shake my head. “That can’t be right. With Lexa, I have made shields, and before me, my mother used it to see glimpses of the future. If it is healing, why did it not heal for her?”

Edward gives me a small smile and bops as he sings a small children’s rhyme. “The crystal knows what the heart rings true, it will show you until you do too.”

I almost sigh in frustration. “And the song means?”

Lexa cuts in, "Are you saying the power of the crystal is entirely dependent on our heart's desire?"

Edward nods excitedly.

This time I do sigh. "So now we have a fairy tale ending all summed up in a cute little rhyme, will we require true loves kiss as well?" I snap.

"Claire?" Lexa questions startled by my outburst.

"Sadly no," Edward answers completely oblivious to my bitter explosion. "It just means everyone has a deep desire to do something, I suspect after living a life where you were forced to kill people all you want to do is give life, not take it."

I shoot him a look, and he holds up his hands. "Carissa mentioned the brand on your thigh, I have seen the wanted posters, and I could have ratted you out already if I wanted to."

"I might as well get it branded to my forehead with how well I am managing to keep my identity a secret," I mutter.

Lexa squeezes my hand. "Perhaps it is time to get some rest?"

I nod and rise to my feet. Edward casts me a sad look before turning to Lexa. "Look after Claire, she was not in a good way when we found her."

I sigh and leave the caravan unable to hear anymore. Lexa comes out a few minutes later and quietly leads me back to our group's little fire. Tash is sitting quietly keeping watch. I grumble a hello to her and curl up under my blanket keeping my back to our tiny camp.

Why does this keep happening? I have survived countless near-death situations before, why must this one surge up within me every time someone even vaguely mentions it? I clench my fists and curl tighter in a ball, surely, I have not become so weak as to cower every time something like this happens.

Lexa sits quietly beside me keeping carefully separate, she doesn't reach for the blanket we share even though the night is cold.

Tash fidgets for a few moments before declaring, "I am going for a walk, see if I can snag any more of that stew."

Lexa shifts beside me. "Of course, I will keep watch while you are gone."

Soft footsteps move away from us, and I try my best to keep the prickle of tears from emerging. Soundlessly Lexa places her hand on my shoulder. I stiffen, then slowly raise my hand to link my fingers with hers,

the contact helps, and I let out a long slow breath. Releasing with it some of the tension that has been building in my body since I was told of my mother's fate.

We sit quietly like this for a long time, and at some point, I fall into a deep sleep.

Something jolts me awake and I listen quietly to the darkness. Nothing. Slowly I roll over and face the dying embers of our small campfire, all of my companions sleep clustered around the fading heat. Lucas snores from the large rock usually occupied by whoever's turn it is to watch. I guess boredom sent him to sleep. I pull myself from the blanket I share with Lexa and the cold of the cavern bites at my skin. I hurry over to the glowing coals and add a few precious sticks and a small log, the fire sighs happily and begins steadily munching on the wood I put there. The wave of heat is an immediate relief from the cold of the cavern and my companions unconsciously roll towards the warmth.

I sit for a while and watch the leaping flames.

"Fire, the bringer of destruction and of life."

I twist around to find Miss Q standing beside me, warming her body by the flames.

I shrug off the fright and turn back to the orange light. "Such a burden for one small fire."

Miss Q settles beside me. "The greatest fires can be started by the smallest of embers."

"Great fires bring death," I snap bitterly.

Miss Q nods. "When a fire rages through the cavern it does bring death to all in its path, the old, twisted trees and plants that refuse to yield. Those same old plants smother the seedling and stop them from taking root." She pauses to stir the fire with a stick. "But fire clears a path, it removes those old twisted plants and allow the younger plants to take root, to grow strong and create a paradise for all on the dust and ash of the mistakes that others laid before them."

I put my head in my hands and abandon our metaphorical use of fire. "I can see why Lexa was chosen from this path." I pull my face from my hands and look over at the sleeping woman. "She is strong, smart, resilient, a leader, kind and-" the word beautiful dies on my lips and an awkward silence settles over us.

“Lexa is a formidable woman,” The quelton agrees. “An appropriate choice.”

I glance at the quelton as she leaves those words to hang in the air.

I stare back at the fire. “Why me?”

The quelton puts her furry paws over her heart. “Because sometimes all the world needs, is for someone to be brave enough to walk through the dark and come back with the sun.”

She puts her furry arm around my shoulder and pulls me in for a hug. I press my face against her shoulder and take the comfort she is offering me. “I believe you can come back with the sun Claire. WE need you, just as much as we need Lexa.”

I startle awake my blanket held tightly in my fists. I look around, expecting to find the quelton but all signs of her are gone. The fire around me is deserted except for Lexa who sits quietly mending a dark blue shirt. I watch her for a time, her hands moving swiftly with the thread, an action she must have repeated a thousand times before.

She reaches for a small stone spindle covered in delicate blue thread, but as she brushes it with her fingertips, it rolls away. Clumsily I crawl over to it and hand it to Lexa.

“I am sorry about last night,” I say quietly. “I was an ass to you and Edward.”

Lexa gives me a tight smile. “You have had to endure a lot these past few weeks, I should have realized before last night the burden was growing too great for you to bear.”

I look down at my dirty fingernails and begin to pick the soil out from under them. “You think I'm weak,” I state.

Lexa sets aside her mending and takes my hand. “It is quite the opposite, I think you have been too strong for too long. Even the mightiest of us must rest sometime Claire.”

I look up at her with a shy smile. Tentatively I stretch, feeling the burn in my back and legs. I lift my pants legs and inspect them finding the patches of blue-purple bruising has faded to an ugly yellow green.

I look down at my necklace, still glowing steadily against my skin. It must be working overtime because my stomach growls loudly with hunger and I feel exhausted regardless of all the sleep I have had.

Edward comes bouncing up to us and dramatically warms his behind by the fire. “How are you lovely ladies today?”

I clear my throat. “Better, thank you. Edward, about last night-”

“Oh, pish posh,” he cuts in waving his hands at me. “You are an inspiration to us all, it takes true skill to piss Darkmor off like you have managed to do every day since you escaped his clutches.”

I chuckle. “Some people may view proximity to me as a health hazard with the way he has sent men and magical machines after me.”

Edward shrugs. “Some people view housing poisonous animals as a health hazard, but that hasn’t stopped me.”

I gape at him and open my mouth to ask what he means when he spirals off on a new tangent. “So, my ladies, my lovely Xineoph’s, have you brought the true owner for my necklace in your little band of merry men and women?”

I glance over at our group, Nathaniel sits with his arms crossed glaring at all the people around him and everyone goes to great lengths to give him plenty of space. Lucas tinkers with the wooden box Lexa found in the giant stone carving, ignoring everything and everyone else. Melissa, pale and shaky, sits beside them and looks like she may throw up at any moment. Tash paces back and forth looking at the small group obviously stressed over everyone’s behavior, and apparent indifference to those around them.

I look back at Edward. “Merry band is not how I would phrase it.”

Edward glances over at them with a smile. “What a lovely adventure you must all be on!”

My eyebrows furrow. Lovely? Edward marches over to the fire and picks up a long-twisted stick. If I had to guess, I would say it was once a root. Probably something that came down in the landslide, my hands ball into fists and I bury them in my lap. Edward grips the branch with both his hands and uses the enormous stick to stir up the fire. Satisfied with the flames he turns and returns to warming his backside by the leaping flames looking at us expectedly.

I glance at Lexa who has paused her steady mending to consider the man, her face perfectly neutral. Is she as worried about his mental stability as I am?

“We did not realize we had to find the Xineoph’s as well as the necklaces. We were running under the assumption that the people who

possessed the necklaces were the ones who could use them,” Lexa fills in.

I turn to Edward. “That’s how it worked for Lexa and me, we both had the necklaces, and we could use them.”

Edward runs a single hand through his wiry red beard. “Hmm. That does put us in a bit of a pickle then.”

I nod silently. I glance around the people crowded around the small area in this rock cavern. “Weren’t you going to Erast to perform?”

Edward nods. “We were able to pay off the guards that were ‘escorting us’ shortly after the first earthquake, and we have been hiding from Darkmor ever since. We wanted to be ready.”

“Ready for what?” I ask.

Edward puffs up his chest and places his hands on his hips. “For Katera's rising.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

Lexa carefully sets aside her mending. “Are you saying the rebellion is going ahead?”

“Of course!” Edward chimes. “Since the rebel leader was lost, people have been following the orders she left behind. Someone has even managed to contact those who dwell above,” Edward says excitedly falling over his words in his hurry to get them out.

The lost rebel leader? I glance at Lexa whose face radiates with happiness, I suppose to those who were there the day Darkmor's scarlet army attacked the compound could only assume Lexa's dead.

I study Lexa's face carefully trying to decipher if we are supposed to reveal her identity. Lexa leans forward. “Do you know who is leading the rebels now?”

Edward scratches his beard. “A young man.” He clicks his fingers. “What was his name? A one-legged fellow, seemed nice enough, even if he is a bit young.”

“Samuel?” I venture.

“Why yes!” Edward exclaims. “A poor naive fellow though, he maintains that the true rebel leader lives, and he is just standing in.”

Lexa looks down thoughtfully at her hands, and I grip my necklace in mine. “Edward, is there a way we can find the Xineoph's?”

“Well, there is this scrying spell you can do, but it will only help you find the Xineoph for the particular necklace you are scrying with,” Edward explains as he bounces in a circle on his feet. “Even then it is vague at best, landing at some point on a map.”

Lexa looks up at the energetic man. “Would you allow us to use your necklace for this scrying spell?”

“Of course,” he sings merrily. “I will go prepare things now, I will be back soon to collect you and your group.”

Without any further explanation he prances off into the caravan I have come to think of as his. “Does Edward seem a little—”

“Unhinged,” Melissa supplies as she plops down beside us, a bowl of soup in hand.

I eye the bowl. “Where did you get that? It's not lunchtime.”

Melissa smiles and her face glistens with sweat. “No, it is not, but if you look as sick as me, everybody tries to feed you.”

“That’s an upside,” I say with a small smile, shifting my pained legs slowly.

Lexa quietly resumes her mending, and I pick at an old dried clump of grass beside me. “This whole necklace thing is becoming more confusing with every step. It seems the more we learn, the more confused I become.”

Lexa lets out a small sigh. “I know what you mean, it is as if every piece of information is carefully crafted to make this whole expedition more perilous and perplexing.”

Melissa clatters her spoon against the side of her bowl. “Maybe it is supposed to be hard. Or maybe you are just looking at it in a way that makes the whole thing seem harder than it is.”

I frown. “We are looking for four lost necklaces, and their apparently different owners, while being hunted by Darkmor and his minions, all at the same time as a huge rebellion that is raging around us, and giant flaming rocks are falling from the sky at random intervals.” I pause and glance at Lexa. “Did I cover everything?”

Lexa smiles. “You forgot the part where the only person who knows anything presents sporadic behavior, and is currently preparing a ritual which may or may not work and at best gives us vague details about where the true owner of his necklace is.”

I turn to Melissa. “Any tips on how to look at this situation in a different way?”

Melissa shakes her head and inspects her almost empty bowl. “Nope, we’re screwed.”

Lexa sets aside the mended shirt and stretches her legs. “And yet we must continue to endure.”

Nathanial stomps over and plonks down beside me scowling. “These people do nothing but sit and sit and sit. They do not even have someone posted on guard.”

“Care to elaborate further?” Lexa enquires.

Nathanial waves his massive hand at the group. “They have scarcely enough food and water for the next two days, they don’t understand that even though this position is well hidden, they are trapped if an attack

comes. Worst of all, not one of them knows how to fight, even their strong man doesn't know more than how to lift weights."

"Maybe you should teach them," I say with a small smile.

Nathanial stops mid-rant to consider my words. "It would not take too long to whip them into shape." He rubs the dark shadow of his early morning beard. "A month at most should be enough time to teach them the basics."

Edward pops up beside me with Tash and Lucas behind him holding a basket of items each. "We are ready!" He chimes and spins in a circle.

I smile and shake my head. If I found the energy to be half as happy as Edward, I would be the second happiest person in all Shadowsoul.

He crouches by our small fire and scoops some of the hot embers into a clay pot, from here he sprinkles in some herbs, and the bowl emits an overly sweet smoke.

"What is in that?" Lexa queries as she peers into the smoking pot.

"Powdered cave mushrooms, Gurmál root, and ground sandalwood," Edward replies and hands the bag to Lexa.

"What is sandalwood?" I ask.

Edward points at the cavern roof. "It is the wood from a tree that grows in the world above. Our true world," he clarifies.

Lexa looks up from her inspection of the bag. "How did you come by this?"

Edward waves his hand. "Someone who knew someone who knew someone and so on." He pauses and adds, "Be careful with your use of it, it is all I have, and in the future, I predict commodities from above will be very hard to come by."

"You are giving it to us?" Tash asks with raised eyebrows.

Edward gives her a confused look. "How else are you going to find the Xineophs and Keepers of the other necklaces?"

Tash seems unsure, but I cut past any further questions she has. "You can locate the Keepers as well?"

Edward nods. "It would be silly if the spell only found the Xineophs. What is the point of knowing who the true bearer is if you cannot find the next necklace?"

I gape at Edward and Melissa nudges me. "See, you were thinking about it too hard."

Edward pulls out a map and lays it on the ground. "Owners of old, owners of new, lead us to the one whose heart is true."

The necklace spins in a circle, apparently of its own accord before the string pulls tight as it strains to reach Lucas. The crystal hovers in the air restrained only by the chain held in Edward's hand.

Lucas holds up his hands as if to surrender. "Is that thing going to impale me?"

Edward raises his eyebrows and shakes the stubborn necklace. "It has never done that before. Usually, it just lands on the map." He turns to look at us. "Are you certain your group is not made up of Xineophs?"

I shrug and Lexa answers carefully. "As I said before, we were not aware we had to find the Xineophs prior to encountering you. The presence of any other than Claire and myself is purely coincidental."

"How do we know that it is pointing at Lucas?" Nathaniel grumps. "And not just someone in that direction?"

Lucas clambers to his feet and moves over to the right, the straining necklace following him. Slowly he moves in a full circle around the group and the necklace leaps on the chain as if it were trying to fling itself upon him.

"Well, that settles it," I say. "The necklace clearly wants Lucas."

Tash lets out a soft giggle, and we all turn to her. "How strange our lives have become when we are more confused about Lucas being a Xineoph than a crystal defying gravity and chasing after his movements apparently of its own accord."

A small smile creeps across my lips, and Edward holds the necklace out to Lucas. Lucas inches over and holds out his hand, the gem seems to leap with joy at his nearness, but upon reaching the palm of his hand, it simply goes limp and glows a soft purple.

"Be careful with it," Edward says, in a soft, mournful tone.

Lucas nods and slowly loops the necklace around his neck gently caressing it as if it were a living being. After seeing the crystal bounce around on its chain, I don't blame him for the assumption.

Lexa with her mind on ever present matters turns to Edward and asks, "How are we to find the next necklace?"

Edward rubs his hands together. "It is simple. You go through the same process with the herbs and hold a necklace above the map and sing,

‘you are lost, but not for long, show us where the missing crystal has gone.’”

I blink. “What stops it from telling us where one of the crystals we have already located is?”

Edward waves at me dismissively. “Don’t be silly, the crystal will know which of its siblings are still missing.”

I open and close my mouth, truly at a loss for how to respond to Edwards words. I glance at Lexa and catch a glimpse of Melissa's face as it contorts into a strange, frustrated expression.

“Melissa, are you okay?” I ask gently.

Melissa turns on me with strangely vacant eyes. She blinks and the weird moment is over, she bends forward and clutches her head with a soft groan.

Tash, who is beside her leans over and sets a soothing hand on her back. “Melissa, did you hear Claire?”

Melissa looks up at me in confusion and rubs her head. “No. I must have missed it. Sorry, what did you ask?”

My eyebrows bend towards my nose, and I repeat, “Melissa, are you okay?”

She nods. “Yeah, I just have this mind-blowing headache. I think I will go have a lie-down.”

Tash takes her arm and leads her away from our group over towards the small fire we had claimed as our own.

Lucas looks pale as he watches Melissa. “She has had a few moments like that since she hit her head.”

“Maybe it will pass?” Edward offers as he scratches his beard.

Nathanial rises to his feet and throws a look at Lexa. “I will go watch over them, both of them are too distracted right now to be truly vigilant.”

Lexa nods and pulls her own emerald necklace from around her neck and holds it so the square crystal dangles from the chain. “You are lost, but not for long, show us where the missing crystal has gone.”

This time the necklace plummets to a place on the map right beside the words ‘Mt Wolner.’

Edward shoves his hands in his pockets. “It sounds better when you sing it.” He chirps.

“Well,” I say gripping my necklace in my hand. “It looks like we have a new direction.

Lexa looks up at me with sparkling eyes. “Yes. It would seem we are destined to travel to Mt Wolner.”

Edward claps. “Excellent, but first you must stay with us for a while, Claire still has not recovered and I have much to teach you.”

Lexa nods and slips her necklace over her head. “Yes, rushing would not be the wisest course of action.”

“Then it is settled, you will stay with us for a while before moving on.” Edward announces before bounding off towards his caravan.”

I climb to my feet and together we watch the man scoop up an arrangement of items from the many boxes he has stacked around his caravan.

I smile at Lexa. “I am looking forward to a rest and getting some answers.”

Lexa smiles back at me and my heart hammers in my chest. “I’m not sure we will just be given the answers,” Lexa says as she places her hand on my lower back and guides me towards our small group sitting around the nearby fire. “Sometimes figuring it out is the reward.”

Lexa drops her arm and sits by the fire and pats the ground beside her waiting for me. I can’t help but think, what if the reward scares me? What if the reward opens so many great unknowns that it overwhelms me?

Lexa seems to sense my unease and takes my hand gently pulling me to the ground beside her. Our fingers lace and we sit in comfortable silence. Something tells me this quest is more than about discovering hidden gems. Something tells me we will learn about more than what is at Mt Wolner.

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